'Asia' Consciousness and Asian Values

By Anthony Milner

Region building is on the move again in Asia. Many commentators will discuss economic and strategic dimensions, but attention must also be given to the ideological work taking place, especially the promotion of an Asian consciousness and the prospects of a revival of interest in Asian values.

The region building has focussed on what has been termed 'ASEAN +3'. In Kuala Lumpur in 1997, Hanoi in 1998, and Manila in 1999, there have been meetings of the ten states of ASEAN together with Japan, China and South Korea. A further meeting will be held in 2000. This is the sort of exclusive Asian regionalism, of course, that Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia has been urging for a decade. He has been advocating it as an alternative to the inclusive regionalism of APEC, for instance, which incorporates the United States, Australia and other Western states. The ASEAN +3 regionalism also received encouragement from the Asia-Europe - ASEM - talks that began in 1996, and, on the Asian side, comprised ASEAN and the big East Asian 'Three'.

Apart from discussing South China Sea issues, information technology projects, social welfare and various other matters, the ASEAN +3 have begun to give serious consideration to economic cooperation. In particular, having resisted a Japanese proposal for an Asian Monetary Fund in 1997, in May 2000 at Chiang Mai the ASEAN +3 Ministers agreed to set up what has been called a regional financing mechanism. There has also been much talk of a Free Trade Zone reaching beyond ASEAN to the whole East Asian group.

At the level of ideas rather than practice, in Hanoi in 1998, at the suggestion of the Korean President, the ASEAN +3 also established an East Asian Vision Group of intellectuals, and it gave the Group the task of proposing concrete steps for closer cooperation in East Asia "politically, economically, culturally and in other ways". There was, in fact, plenty of visionary talk at the 1999 Manila meeting. It was certainly not left to Prime Minister Mahathir to invoke aspirations about Asian unity. The Philippines' President spoke of "the dream" of "an East Asian Common Market, an East Asian Currency and one East Asian community". The Chinese Premier declared his preference for "closer East Asian cooperation" to "strengthen and deepen" what he called this "effective dialogue mechanism". The Korean President talked of the need to find ways to "nurture East Asia into a single community of cooperation", and to promote an "East Asian Economic Cooperation System".

The challenges to ASEAN +3 regionalism, it is widely admitted, are immense. The region, as is well known, is characterised by many types of division. The China/Japan division is a dramatic one. But there is also antagonism between Japan and Korea, Thailand and Burma, Vietnam and Thailand ⋯⋯. One can go on and on, listing the long-established suspicions and animosities that operate within the East Asian region.
It is also true, as many have observed, that in cultural terms there is not one but many Asias. Consider the great religious/civilisational divisions - Islam, Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Confucianism; and one needs to take note of the differing impacts of colonialism in the region, especially the differences between British, Dutch, French, American and Japanese colonialism. Then there are the clashes between ethnicities: we read mostly about Indonesia, Burma and Malaysia, but such clashes exist almost everywhere. To take one further source of division, there are also signs of a type of North-South divide within the region, with Northeast Asia being ahead of Southeast Asia in terms of economic growth, investment attractiveness and political stability.

A further reason for caution about the potential for ASEAN +3 is the record of regionalism within ASEAN itself. It is true that ASEAN has had little success in handling such concrete challenges as the Haze or the Financial Crisis of 1997/1998, and it would be tempting to go on to ask how more effective the new and even more unwieldy ASEAN +3 will become, at least in the immediate future.

Especially in the last two or three years, quite a few prominent Western commentators have certainly succumbed to the temptation to talk down Asian regionalism, or at least to dismiss attempts to promote 'Asia' consciousness and to enunciate a code of Asian values. (Usually the latter include a stress on hard work, saving, order and harmony, communitarianism, family loyalty and a refusal to compartmentalise religion from other spheres of life). Apart from the observation that the region is so culturally complex and that it is ridiculous to speak of Asian consciousness or Asian values, it is noted that many so-called Asian values are equally Western values, and in some cases have been deliberately inculcated in Asian societies as a consequence of the influence on Asian elites of Western models. The role of the writings of the popular philosopher, Samuel Smiles, in developing the philosophy of 'hard work' and 'self-help' in Japan and a number of other Asian societies over the last century is an excellent example of such influence.

Other points made about Asian values include the argument that Asian values are constructs of Asian leaderships rather than the genuinely-held beliefs of their subjects. It is also argued that the ideology of Asian values is a radical conservatism that serves the needs of capitalism at a particular stage of its development in specific Asian societies; it is an ideology that "combines organic statism with market economies". It has been noted, in addition, that there is disagreement within the Asian region about Asian values - NGOs and even some political leaders, including former President Lee of Taiwan, are powerful advocates of "universal", liberal values.

The case for ridiculing Asian values, and even Asian consciousness, it is clear for all to see, had a massive extra boost with the collapse of the economies of a number of Southeast Asian countries and South Korea in the so-called Asian Crisis. In the words of one Western commentator, the crisis sounded "the death knell for the Asia-values debate". It showed that "in the long run you need openness and accountability to have sustainable economic growth". "Asian values", claimed the Editor-in-Chief of the US News and World Report, "have become Asian liabilities". According to the widely-read Francis Fukuyama, "What the current crisis will end up doing is to puncture the idea of Asian exceptionalism. The laws of economics have not been suspended in
Asia". Writing in The Independent, Diane Coyle concluded that the crisis will "finally lay to rest this unquestioning worship of Asian values ... capitalism in its free-wheeling, Anglo-Saxon variety is coming into its own".

The New Statesman was explicit in going beyond economics. In May 1998, it observed that "yesterday, we admired Asian values and almost despised our own. Today, deregulated America is in fashion". Sebastian Mallaby, writing in The National Interest, saw with perhaps unrivalled clarity the imperialist possibilities in the Asian economic crisis. The 'Rise of the East' could not have been further from his mind. America, he observed, "enjoys world dominance in diplomacy, warfare, industry, science, media and the sheer sense of how to live". He admitted that some "conservative" Americans ponder "whether Asian values might teach Americans something". In fact, however, America now had the opportunity, especially through the IMF, to "spread its worldview at almost no cost to itself", though, Mallaby added with due humility, "a hegemon should proceed cautiously by all means".

In his sweeping and influential survey of the region's economic and political progress, the former Governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patten, made perhaps the most sweeping dismissal of what he called the "Asian values ballyhoo". The crisis, as he saw it, had underlined the point that "a number of Asian economies had outgrown their political structures". The Asian autocracies, he suggested, cannot resist the forces of history. You "cannot compartmentalise freedom. You may build walls between economies and politics, but they are walls of sand". Patten gave little credence to the role of different values or cultures. In his view, the basic fact is that every human, from all over the globe, faces 'similar problems', and they will all "discover similar solutions rooted in the same respect for human decency and in the same regard for an economic philosophy that maximises the opportunity for the individual to excel".

To read the eloquent Chris Patten one might quickly come to the conclusion that Asian regionalism along with Asian values, will be swept aside by economic and cultural globalisation. But such a conclusion must be considered with caution. First of all, exclusive Asian regionalism is by no means a new development. It has a history of a century and more. The idea of Asia cannot be dismissed, as some have done as a European creation, brought into being for European purposes.

'Asia is one' announced the Japanese art historian, Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913) at the opening of the Twentieth century. He explained that 'not even the snowy barriers' between Chinese and Indian civilisations 'can interrupt for one moment the broad expanse of love for the Ultimate and Universal, which is the common thought of every Asiatic race' and distinguishes these people from 'those maritime peoples of the Mediterranean and Baltic, who love to dwell on the Particular, and search out the means, not the end, of life'.

In India, as well, the idea of 'Asia' was given ideological attention in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Bengali religious leader, Vivekananda (1863-1902), pronounced that, 'on the material plane, Europe has mainly been the basis during modern times'; on the 'spiritual plane, Asia has been the basis throughout the history of the world'. 'Asia', he stated, 'produces giants in spirituality just as the Occident produces giants in politics (and) giants in science'. The Nobel Prize-winning Indian
poet, Rabindranath Tagore, although well aware of the variation that existed among 'oriental' cultures, nevertheless for years devoted energy to the task of promoting a renaissant Asian civilisation. He evoked a specifically spiritual civilisation for 'the East'. He helped to establish an elaborate Asian Research Institute where Europeans as well as Asians would study Asian languages and cultures. Other Indian thinkers of the early twentieth century stressed the fact that Champa (Vietnam), Cambodia, Java, Bali and other parts of Southeast Asia could be described as India's 'ancient cultural colonies'. Thus, they were suggesting not just spiritual or religious commonalities, but that historical and cultural links with India provided a unifying basis.

Such thinking about 'Asia' did not develop independently in India or Japan. There were relationships between the ideologues working across the Asian region. Vivekananda, for instance, visited Japan; Okakura spent a year in India. Tagore knew of Okakura and was certainly impressed by him: 'it was from Okakura', explained Tagore, that we first 'came to know there was such a thing as an Asiatic mind'. Tagore himself traveled to Japan, China and many parts of Southeast Asia, establishing numerous relationships with leading thinkers in these societies. He found that ideas about the 'East' and 'Asia' met resistance in China, where such notions as the 'Middle Kingdom' and 'Southern Barbarians' influenced Chinese perceptions of, and disdain toward, other 'Asian' peoples. But especially after China was defeated in war by Japan in 1895, young Chinese thinkers turned to Japan for inspiration. In China, the nationalist regime of the 1920s began to speak of an Asian spiritual unity, naming Sun Yat-Sen as the father of what they perceived to be a Sinocentric movement.

The Japanese victory over Russia in 1905 was an impetus to the movement towards an Asian unity. There were reports of a growing 'disposition to believe that Asia belongs of right to Asiatics, and that any event which brings that right nearer to realisation to all Asiatics is a pleasurable one'. Japan tended to encourage this sentiment by inviting Asian students to Japanese universities and forming the Pan-Asiatic Association and other societies, which fostered closer relations between Japan and the peoples of the Asian region. The constitution of the Indo-Japanese Association, to take just one example, conveys the spirit of these relations by speaking of 'Asiatics (having) the same claim to be called men as the Europeans themselves'.

In 1943, one Japanese author, looking back over the earlier part of the century, observed that the Russo-Japanese war 'awakened from a long night's sleep this humiliated, disrupted, miserable and numb Asia'. World War II gave rise to further developments in this awakening. Ideological statements from the period of the Japanese Co-Prosperity Sphere of World War II referred to the 'ancient glory of the spiritual life of Asian peoples'. They stressed how, in a sense, Japan had absorbed 'both China and India', and they harkened back to the Buddhist past of T'ang China (7th to 10th century) and its broad influence on Japan and other parts of East Asia.

In the post-second World War period, as is well known, there have been numerous attempts at region building. Developments include the Inter-Asian Relations Conference of 1947 in New Delhi, and further meetings of Asian states in New Delhi in 1949 and Colombo in 1954. Within the region, Seato, Maphilindo and ASEAN have all been attempts at creating associations of Asian states. It is true that even
ASEAN has had limited success if judged in terms of the capacity to solve major practical issues. At the same time, however, such organisations, in seemingly mundane ways, do help to promote the type of regional consciousness that will need to underpin future region building.

Thus, when he attempts to assess the progress of East Asian regionalism, the ASEAN Secretary-General, Severino, is right to stress the advantages of gradualism - the fact, as he puts it, that "East Asia has been coming together in almost imperceptible ways slowly but steadily". He points, in particular, to economic developments - to the increase of ASEAN exports to Northeast Asia and the investment role of Japan and Korea in ASEAN and China. But the gradual building up of a sense of community takes place in less concrete ways as well. The Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, has referred to the quiet style in which members of ASEAN have not only conversed with, but also criticised one another, always seeking to avoid the "fractious relations" that undermine cooperation. The type of ASEAN criticism he speaks of may not be as robust as many Westerners (and even some Southeast Asians) would prefer, but we should not underestimate the significance of this inter-state conversation as a bonding operation - an operation that is all the more essential precisely because the ASEAN region, and the wider East Asian region, are so dramatically diverse, for instance by European Community standards.

"Conversation", of course, is very much the word. In ASEAN it has been talk, talk, talk - with its twenty-one Ministerial Boards, twenty-nine of Senior Officials and 120 technical or working level groups. The ASEAN Chamber of Commerce, the ASEAN Business Forum, the ASEAN University Network, the ASEAN Vegetable Oils Club - the list goes on and on, and it is important to recognise the extent to which the sheer relentlessness of such apparently mundane events can help to promote a sense of community that reaches beyond the individual nations involved. As the amount of ASEAN +3 talk increases it will, in like fashion, one supposes, work toward promoting a wider East Asian consciousness.

The idea of 'Asia', as the list of working-level groups suggests, is not merely spreading at the government level in the region. Far outside the meetings of Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers, there seems to be an increasing amount of talk about 'Asia' in the Asian region. Just look at some news items of the last few weeks: a Hong Kong business chief speaks of the "fundamental psychology" of Asia; others talk of "Asian teaching methods". "Pan-Asia Cinema", we are told, "has arrived". A Chinese director declares that "I think we (Asians) share some of the same kind of feeling ... of mood". Another director asks "why can't Asians jump out of their local markets and make movies for one another". A recent book from Taiwan on the popular cultures of the region observes that "anyone living in East Asia would notice that a strange, hybrid form of pop music has developed around the region".

Citing a few examples in this way, from the popular culture of the East Asian region, suggests the presence of the incremental regionalism of which the ASEAN Secretary-General spoke. Ideas, one assumes, begin to gain their own momentum, but it is also important to recognise the conscious ideological work that has been taking place in the region, promoting the 'Asia' idea. From a Western perspective, it is especially important to give attention to what is driving this ideological work.
The first observation that should be made about the 'Asia' ideologues concerns their resourcefulness. It is a resourcefulness that has been especially necessary in the context of the Asian Crisis. Lee Kuan Yew, for instance, has argued with some bluntness, and some justification, that "Asian values are not the cause of the meltdown because nepotism, favouritism and corruption have been endemic and present since the 'Asian Economic Miracle' which - with its high growth rates - began nearly twenty years ago". Furthermore, if Asian values were to blame, he asked, "how come Hong Kong and Singapore have not been affected?". Turning to the Philippines, he noted that that country has been "praised for democracy and freedom of the press", but "have they done better in this crisis?".

In Prime Minister Mahathir's response to his liberal democrat critics, he actually seems to see the Asian crisis as an opportunity to reassert Asian values and Asian unity, warning that it was Western capitalism not Asian values that brought about the crisis in the first place. He even raised the spectre of a "Western conspiracy" to "shake up the economies of the Asian Miracle nations", and speaks of "racists" who are "not happy to see us prosper" and who are "descendants of the old white-supremacist colonialists". Mahathir then proceeded to identify some solutions to the crisis that entail employing the traditional 'Asian' style of intervention by government and, furthermore, he suggested such a solution should involve greater collaboration between Asian countries.

There was real defiance in Mahathir's statements, and this was inevitably encouraged by the seriousness of the domestic, political and economic challenges which he has been facing. He reminded the world that, despite Western attacks on Asian values and Asian governments, "East Asian countries had all grown at a rate well above that of the developed countries of the West. And their growth can be shown to have benefited people as a whole". He also repeated his long-time praise for what he has called the "Asian system of lifetime employment and low wages". He confirmed that he "still believes Asian values will pull us through". After all, Mahathir said, "hard work, discipline, a strong commitment to the community, thrift and moderation are Asian values which have in fact contributed to the emergence of the Asian Tigers and Dragons".

As for Western or Anglo-Saxon triumphalism, Mahathir could not have been more dismissive. Those who brought down Asia's economies he accuses of being "totally materialistic, inconsiderate of the problems of others". He asked whether "Asian values are bad as compared to Western values". "History", he argued in an angry and almost foolishly one-sided account of the twentieth century, "provides the answer. The two world wars and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Asian cities, the holocaust, the killings of Bosnians - these are not perpetrated by Asians".

It would be easy to portray Mahathir as an isolated and perhaps desperate figure, especially in the context of the international and local criticism he has faced over his treatment of former Deputy Premier, Anwar Ibrahim. As has already been suggested, however, Mahathir's (and Lee's) response to the economic crisis, and their views in many other 'Asia' issues, cannot be portrayed as unique in the Asian region. Although systematic critiques of the type carried out by Mahathir are rare, from time to time we
see clear evidence from elsewhere of support for the type of viewpoints he enunciates. To take some random examples, Kim Yong Hwan, the former Chairman of the Joint Presidential Committee on economic policies in South Korea, criticised the International Monetary Fund program for his country, arguing that reform should be more suited to the "Asian constitution", and that closer cooperation should be fostered among Asian nations. Thailand, in 1997, it should be noted, proposed a single Asian currency. Sura Sanittanant, Adviser to the Thai Deputy Prime Minister, was said in January 1998 to be engaged (in the spirit of Mahathir) in promoting the idea of Asians bonding together to overcome the financial crisis. He was reported as having pointed to special meetings with Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines, and having argued that an Asian trading block similar to Mahathir's East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) is currently gaining international support. Such comments, of course, help to explain the wide support for "Asia" initiatives expressed at the ASEAN +3 meeting in Manila in 1999.

Whether or not Mahathir-type solutions to the Asian economic crisis make economic sense, the need to estimate how far they have attracted support around the region is clearly a matter of genuine significance, even for economists.

In other ways too, the support for the 'Asia' idea seems to be broad based. Indeed, the impression of narrowness may be largely due to the media's tendency to concentrate on Mahathir and Lee. To take just a few anecdotal examples of the width of support: Thus, the Seoul Bureau Chief for the Far Eastern Economic Review commented in 1994 on the "suspicion arising from Malaysia to Korea to Japan, that the Western media's agenda of human rights and environmental protection......are means to keep Asia from developing further economically". Chinese spokespeople, not surprisingly, have made so-called 'Confucian' values central to an 'Asian' cultural unity, arguing that in East Asia the 'Confucian' commitment to "hard work, thrift, filial, piety and national pride" has encouraged rapid economic growth. In Japan, Thailand and the Philippines there has also been a growing interest in 'Asian values' and an upsurge of enthusiasm for the whole concept of 'Asia'. The expression 'the Asianisation of Asia' has been used by the Japanese intellectual, Yoichi Funabashi, to describe the well-documented development of regional interest in the 'Asia' ideal and 'Asian values'.

One tactic used to demonstrate the narrowness of support for the Mahathir-Lee position has been to cite what are perceived to be the liberal views of their most influential, Asian opponents. It is true, for instance, that Anwar Ibrahim, the beleaguered former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, has pleased the international proponents of liberal values with the declaration that "it is altogether shameful, if ingenious, to cite Asian values as an excuse for autocratic practices and denial of basic rights and civil liberties". It is also true that the Philippines leadership has not tended to provide enthusiastic public support specifically for the 'Asian values' case. But one cannot move from these observations to the conclusion that Anwar and the current Philippines leader are advocates of universal liberal values. They seem to be influenced by the spirit, at least, of the 'Asian values' argument, in the sense of being determined to assert the local against the global, the national or regional perspective against the Western one.
In September 1997, for instance, Anwar was using Mahathir-type language when he spoke of the need for ASEAN members to "draw up collective strategies to fight those vicious speculators" who had been destroying Asian economies. It is also important to remember Anwar's long and impressive record as an Islamic intellectual and activist. Once the leader of the reformist Muslim youth movement, ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia), that called for a return in Malaysian society to true Islamic values, he was recruited to the UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) government in 1982. As a junior Minister visiting Australia in 1983, Anwar complained about the "wholesale imitation of Western values and practices" in Malaysia and explained that "Islam provides an ideological alternative to the dominant paradigm". In recent years he has continued to speak of a Western/Asian dichotomy, noting in particular that, unlike the Westerner, "the Asian man is a persona religiosus. Faith and religious practice....permeates the life of the community". Anwar goes on to argue that "Asians firmly rooted in their cultural and spiritual traditions do possess the intellectual capacity to perceive the cultural unity of Asia, its meta-culture".

Another Asian leader - one who has been supportive of Anwar since his arrest in October 1998, and who has therefore been associated with a liberal perspective - also deserves more careful attention from Western commentators. Joseph Estrada, President of the Philippines, possesses an approach to government which involves not only support for democratic procedures but also the aim of re-establishing the national leadership's communication with the non-elite, Filipino community and, indeed, re-establishing its roots in the populist heritage of the country. He is remarkable for having been the first Philippines' President to give his inaugural address in the Tagalog language rather than English and, at the time of celebration of the centenary of the Philippines' revolution, the nineteenth-century revolutionary hero he appears most to admire is not the largely Spanish-speaking Jose Rizal, who is usually given most official adoration, but the Tagalog-speaking populist figure, Bonifacio, who was remarkable for addressing the masses in the language and idiom of their own folk literature. In this sense, in this seemingly most Western democratic of Asian states, President Estrada seems to have been engaging in the 're-Asianisation' of The Philippines.

A further observation that can be made about the ideological work on behalf of the 'Asia idea' is that it cannot be dismissed as being mere elite experimentation. Broad generalisations about the role of culture in human affairs have met with severe academic criticism in recent times, and with justification. There has certainly been a tendency to view 'culture' in too static terms, and to underplay the extent to which 'culture' can be invented, often for political purposes. Nevertheless, it is equally unwise to take for granted, for instance, that the advocates of Asian values are entirely alienated from their own societies. In an important survey analysis by Joel Kahn - to take just one example - interviews were carried out with 130 middle class Malays. Kahn "found that almost all respondents articulated some form of the Asian values argument". They stressed concerns about the "threat posed to Malay culture by modernisation" and criticised the West for its "lack of family values, individual and selfishness, a lack of cultural values, permissiveness, secularisation and uncaringness."

Apart from conducting and assessing surveys that focus on values in the abstract,
there has been a certain amount of other, recent analysis that does draw attention to
the role of culture in everyday economic and social behaviour in the Asian region,
and that does take into account current conceptual critiques of the category 'culture'.
One recent exercise of such 'open' cultural analysis, concerned primarily with specific
features of commercial activity in the Asian region, has drawn attention to the
particular characteristics of "Chinese capitalism", insisting that it is "first and
foremost a network capitalism. It is built from the ground up, not on the basis of legal
contracts and the supervisory authority of the state but on particularistic relationships
of trust". In turning to a discussion of Malay and Javanese organisational perspectives,
the analysis observes that quite unlike the Chinese, they tend to be "reluctant to
submit to patriarchal authority, at least when it comes to economic affairs", and thus
their families seem "more individualistic than their Chinese counterparts". Another
contrast within the Asian region in the area of business culture, remarked upon in this
study, is the way successful Chinese businesses are "marked not by the creation of an
ever-larger and vertically integrated corporation as in South Korea or Japan, but by a
mother company's establishment of independent firms loosely tethered in a multi-firm
business group".

In a second, Australia-based investigation dealing with Asian values and conceptual
perspectives in a broad range of practical relationships, Malay business people, for
instance, are described as perceiving the Chinese habit of charging interest on loans to
family members as repugnant to their sense of family obligation. Industrial relations is
presented in this study as a further area in which there exist considerable contrasts in
perspective in the Asian region, with South Korea, in particular, being especially
confrontationist by other Asian standards. In business ethics, to take another
dimension of business culture, Thais and Indonesians are identified as holding a very
different view of gifts of money in the carrying out of a commercial transaction,
compared, for instance, with Chinese or Malaysians. In a series of other areas -
including the analysis of such phenomena as perceptions of 'national security', the role
of government and the meaning of democracy - this Australian study draws attention
both to the range of perspectives operating within the Asian region and to the way in
which virtually any value or perspective is subject to far-reaching processes of
change.

The type of observations made in both these studies - which focus on day-to-day
practical experience rather than the broad influence of, and contest between, cultural
traditions - reinforce strongly the image of cultural complexity in the Asian region.
The presence of such cultural complexity, it should be stressed, contradicts the
viewpoints of both the 'Asian values' proponents and their critics. The examination of
economic and social interaction provides little evidence of a coherent value system
across Asia, but it also makes absolutely clear that it is impossible to discount the
importance in the society and economy of the role of contrasting value systems.
Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew, of course, are vigorous ideologues, but the type of
recent cultural analysis I describe, like the conclusions offered by opinion surveys and
questionnaires, demonstrates that these Southeast Asian leaders do not by any means
construct their ideological packages in a cultural vacuum.

The final point I wish to make about the ideological work being undertaken on behalf
of the 'Asia' idea is that it must be understood in the context of the long campaign
against Western colonialism - a consideration that, obviously enough, has a particular significance for Western commentators hoping to discern the future directions of Asian regionalism.

The much-published Singapore diplomat, Kishore Mahbubani, has been eloquent in his portrayal of this aspect of the intellectual endeavour and contest that has been a part of the 'Asian values' debate. He has observed that "it is vital for Western minds to understand that the efforts by Asians to rediscover Asian values are not only or even primarily a search for political values. They involve, for instance, a desire to reconnect with their historical past after this connection had been ruptured both by colonial rule and the subsequent domination of the globe by a Western Weltanschauung". What Asian thinkers have been undertaking, Mahbubani insists, is "an effort to define their own personal, social and national identities that enhances their sense of self-esteem in a world in which their immediate ancestors had subconsciously accepted the fact that they were lesser beings in the Western universe".

The anti-colonial project, as these comments suggest, is a distinctly intellectual project. The attempt to discover alternatives to the Western narratives and Western conceptual architecture is an academic enterprise, as much as any other, and one of its consequences is to breathe new life into previously moribund academic disciplines. In the words of Partha Chatterjee, the influential Indian historian, "against the arrogant, intolerant, self-aggrandising national subject of modernity, critics in recent years have been trying to resurrect the virtues of the fragmentary, the local, and the subjugated...". When Anwar Ibrahim speaks of Islam as providing "an ideological alternative to the dominant paradigm", he is engaged in precisely this type of intellectual subversion on behalf of Islam. He and other Islamic intellectuals are well aware of the complex, deep-running influences of colonialism in Malay society. In social, legal and economic matters they look for ways to introduce an Islamic perspective, including an Islamic epistemology. To quote an English philosopher who engaged in close debate with Muslim intellectuals at the high point of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia during the 1970's and 1980's, Islamic critics of the 'dominant paradigm' have been "reasserting the place of Revelation as an epistemologically legitimate mode of knowledge".

Even in the Philippines, after centuries of Spanish and, later, American rule, there has been an academic endeavour to resist the Western global, especially in the form of an attempt to re-establish dialogue with a pre-colonial past. The written evidence of the 'Malayan' heritage of the Filipinos is being closely examined with the warning that "our so-called national culture is still emerging". Certain old values, or key concepts located in the different Filipino languages are identified - concepts concerned with 'spirit', 'internality', 'conscience', 'life drive', 'personhood' and so forth - and then consideration given to the way in which these critical categories might be incorporated in interpretations of the past and, by implication, future projections for Filipino society.

This type of intellectual inquiry is integral to the ideological project announced so eloquently by Anwar Ibrahim, Mahbubani and others. Also, although it often leads to conclusions that differ sharply from the specific package of values and aspirations
insisted on by Mahathir and Lee, the determination to counter the pervasive colonial heritage is very much in the spirit of the 'Asian values' ideology. Linking together these different types of activists - ranging from the defiant, didactic Mahathir to the determined academic researcher who seeks to strip back the layers of Western hegemony - helps to underline the fact that the 'Asian values' phenomenon cannot be seen in crude terms merely as a tool manipulated by a political or capitalist regime, or an artificial screen behind which to hide willfully illiberal government. The 'Asian values' debate of the 1990's, it must be emphasised, is an episode in the long-term, post-colonial cultural project. There is no question about the colonial heritage being the target of this ideological attack, but there is genuine confusion and debate about precisely what type of regional, national, religious and other visions will be developed to replace, or at least modify, the powerful globalising forces that in many cases trace their origins to that European heritage. The "dialogue" with Asian civilisations, the attempt to "reconnect with (an) historical past" (to recall the aspiration of Mahbubani) is a genuine intellectual inquiry and the possible outcomes, as he himself admits, are not yet fully known to the participants.

During the years of the 'Asian miracle', of course, there was a sense of exhilaration about the 'Asian values' campaign. Mahbubani wrote of the "explosion of confidence" that gave East Asians the sense that "they can do anything as well as, if not better than other cultures". These were indeed heady days for those public intellectuals who, working to some extent in sympathy with the 'Asian values' political leaderships, committed themselves to the task of asserting intellectual as well as political agency on behalf of their region. After the onset of the Crisis, Mahbubani admitted a "genuine hint of regret at having spoken so confidently of the rise of Asia". But I think he was right to see the 'Asian values' debate of the 1990's as only one episode in a much longer process of international, cultural reconfiguration.

Mahbubani was quite mistaken, however, when he suggested that this 1990's debate will be seen in retrospect as the "initial round" in the long campaign. It actually strengthens his case to situate the debate in its proper place, as occurring well into the long-term process of defending the 'local' in the Asian region against what is seen to be the Western global. To understand the 'Asian values' program within the context of this larger historical realignment, that began in the nineteenth-century, draws attention to the well-established forces that help maintain the direction of change in the Asian region, even at a time of economic reversal.

Conclusion
As we watch the development of Asian regionalism in the opening years of this new century, it will be wise to pay attention to the 'Asia' ideological project, as well as issues of security and trade. Just what type of regionalism triumphs - an exclusive regionalism or an inclusive regionalism embracing the United States, Australia and other Western countries - will be determined in part by the success or otherwise of the promotion of 'Asia' consciousness. An inclusive regionalism, of course, will be promoted by the forces of globalisation, but it will need to compete against long-established cultural values in the different societies of Asia. Just as importantly, it will need to counter the influence of a century of ideological work that is directed against Western hegemony. The history of the ideological work behind the 'Asia' idea and
Asian values, which has been examined in this paper, suggests that there will continue to be strong voices in the region determined to interpret the Asian crisis in anti-Western terms. Those who expect that the economic, security and other processes of ASEAN +3 will soon take on an inclusive character, welcoming the participation of non-Asian countries, may well be disappointed.

(Professor Anthony Milner is Basham Professor of Asian History and Dean of the Faculty of Asian Studies at the Australian National University.)