

“The End of History”: An Asian Reaction

By

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SINGAPORE -- Twenty years ago when the Berlin Wall fell, it was celebrated as the so-called "end of history," the final victory of the West. This week, Barack Obama, the first black president of the once triumphant superpower in that Cold War contest, heads to Beijing to meet America's bankers -- the Chinese Communist government, a prospect undreamt of 20 years ago. Surely, this twist of the times is a good point of departure for taking stock of just where history has gone over these past two decades.

Let me begin with an extreme and provocative point to get the argument going: Fukuyama's essay "The End of History" may have done some serious brain damage to Western minds in the 1990's and beyond. Fukuyama should not be blamed for this brain damage. He wrote a subtle, sophisticated and nuanced essay. However, few Western intellectuals read the essay in its entirety. Instead, the only message they took away from the essay were two phrases which can be found in the essay; namely The End of History = The Triumph of the West.

Western hubris was thick in the air then. I know. I experienced it. This hubris explained how the Belgian Foreign Minister, Willy Claes, speaking on behalf of Europe, could tell a group of Asians in 1991 "The Cold War has ended. There are only two superpowers left: United States and Europe." This hubris also explains how Western minds failed to see that instead of the triumph of the West, the 1990's would see the end of Western domination of world history (but not the end of the West) and the return of Asia.

There is no doubt that the West has contributed to the return of Asia. As I document in my book, "The New Asian Hemisphere: the Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East", several Asian societies had succeeded because they had finally understood, absorbed and implemented the seven pillars of Western wisdom; namely free market economics, science and technology, meritocracy, pragmatism, culture of peace, rule of law and education. Notice what is missing from the list: namely, Western liberalism despite Fukuyama's claim that "The triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism."

The general assumption in Western minds after reading Fukuyama's essay was that the world would in one way or another become more westernized. Instead, the exact opposite has happened. Modernization has spread across the world. But modernization has been accompanied by de-westernization, not westernization. Fukuyama

acknowledges this today. As he said in his interview with Nathan Gardels on October 31, 2009: “the old version of the idea modernization was Euro-centric, reflecting Europe’s own development. That did contain attributes which sought to define modernization in a quite narrow way.”

In the same interview, Fukuyama was right in emphasizing that the three components of political modernization were: the creation of an effective state that could enforce rules, the rule of law that binds the sovereign and accountability. Indeed, these are the very traits of political modernization that many Asian states are aspiring to achieve. All Asians agree that no state can function or develop without an effective government. Asians feel particularly vindicated in this point of view after the recent financial crisis. One reason why the United States came to grief was the deeply held ideological assumption in the mind of key American policymakers, like Alan Greenspan, that Ronald Reagan was correct in saying that “Government is not a solution to our problem, government is the problem.” Fortunately, Asians did not fall prey to this ideological assumption.

Consequently, in the 21st century, history will unfold in the exact opposite direction of what Western intellectuals anticipated when the Cold War ended. Then they all assumed that The End of History = The Triumph of the West. Instead, we will now see that The Return of History = The Retreat of the West. One prediction I can make confidently is that the Western footprint on the world, which was hugely oversized in the 19th and 20th centuries, will retreat significantly in the 21st century.

This will not mean a retreat of all Western ideas. Indeed many key ideas like free market economics and rule of law will continue to be embraced more and more. However, few Asians will believe that the Western societies will be best at implementing Western ideas. Indeed, the general assumption of Western competence in governance and management will be replaced by an awareness that the West has become quite inept in managing its economies. A new gap will develop. Respect for Western ideas will remain but respect for Western practices will diminish, unless Western performance in governance improves again.

Sadly, in all the discussions on “The End of History” twenty years later, few Western commentators have dared to address the biggest lapse in Western practice. The fundamental underlying assumption of “The End of History” hypothesis was that the West would remain the “beacon” (a word found in Fukuyama’s essay) for the world in democracy and human rights. In 1989, if anyone had dared to predict that within 15 years, the “beacon” of human rights would become the first Western developed state to reintroduce torture, everyone would have shouted “impossible”. Yet the impossible happened!

Few in the West understand how much shock Guantanamo has caused in the non-Western minds. Hence, many are puzzled that Western intellectuals continue to assume that they can portray themselves as paragons of virtue when they speak to the rest of

the world on human rights. Fukuyama is right to emphasize the importance of “accountability”. Yet no one in the West has been held accountable for Guantanamo. If so, what moral authority does the West have to speak on the issues of human rights anymore? This loss of moral authority is the exact opposite outcome of the celebratory mood that enveloped Western minds when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.

Does this mean we should give up hope? Will the world become a sadder place? Probably few in the West will remember what Fukuyama said in the last paragraph of his essay. He said “The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history.”

Here too, as the 21st century unfolds, we will see the exact opposite outcome. The return of Asia will be accompanied by a massive Asian renaissance where many diverse Asian cultures will rediscover their lost heritage of art and philosophy. Indeed, instead of sadness, Asians will be engulfed with great joy and happiness. There is no question that Asians will celebrate the return of history in the 21st century. The only question is whether the West will join them in these celebrations or will they keep waiting for the end to come?

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