

Europe must open up to Asia, but with its values firmly in hand

By Dominique Moisi

Kishore Mahbubani, a prominent Asian voice from Singapore and a man often highly critical of Europe, was recently asked what Asia could learn from Europe. His reply: Europe was above all the continent of peace, compassion, and cooperation.

“Asia” may not exist culturally, historically, religiously, socially and economically, the way that Europe does. It is a much more varied continent. But “Asians” have been looking at, and reflecting upon, the European experiment for a long time. Enlightened Japanese elites are fascinated by Franco-German reconciliation. Could that model be applied to Japan’s relations with its former enemies, from Korea to China? And today, with the irresistible rise of a more assertive China, the European example of a continent where the prospect of war between traditional enemies – or contemporary rivals – has simply disappeared is more attractive than ever.

One does not naturally associate China with the quest for compassion. Yet some Chinese have recently discovered the virtues of the Nordic social model, and Chinese delegations have been coming to Oslo regularly to see what lessons they can bring home.

The reasoning of China’s elites is pragmatic: if the Chinese were reassured by the existence of a social-welfare state, they would probably save less and spend more, allowing the domestic market to take over from export-led growth. Although the European Union’s image has deteriorated, Asians still find Europe’s “sharing of sovereignty” model appealing in many ways.

For Mahbubani, the “lessons of Europe” are crystal clear. If emerging Asia begins to look more and more “like a socially and politically harmonious Europe,” the world would be a much better place.

At a time when Europeans are full of self-doubt, though perhaps not as morose as the French, this praise from thoughtful Asians is more than welcome. Europeans, unfortunately, too often fail to see the merits of their peaceful conquest over their own worst natures.

Moreover, Europeans should, in the same spirit of openness, ask themselves what they can learn from Asia. In a multi-polar world, the flow of examples and inspiration has become a two-way street. Europeans can no longer look down upon Asians with a “Western” combination of arrogance and ignorance, perceiving themselves as the unique carriers of a universal message.

The problem, of course, is that the concept of Asia is largely a Western one. Asians do not perceive themselves as Asians in the way that most Europeans view themselves as Europeans.

India's historical patrimony is very different from China's, for example, not to mention the singular experience of Japan.

Yet it is legitimate to ask what, for Europeans looking at Asia, would be the equivalent of the "peace, compassion and cooperation" that Asians see in Europe? Could it be a combination of hope, energy, long-term thinking, and curiosity?

Hope is a state of mind and not only the result of economic growth. Hope means confidence, and young Asians are exuding the stuff, whereas young Europeans – arrogant toward others and diffident toward themselves – too often lack "appetite" and cling to the status quo, seeming to demand protection from life. Many Chinese may dream of spending like Europeans, but the nightmare of most Europeans nowadays is that they might have to start working as hard as the Chinese.

Beyond confidence and the energy that goes with an appetite for success, Europeans lack long-term thinking and curiosity about the "other" in general. As a result, they know little about the history, culture, and languages of Asia. By contrast, the large numbers of young Chinese and Indians who are graduating from the best Western universities (mostly American) know the Western mind from the inside, and thus feel that they understand "what makes us tick."

Indeed, they are "us" while remaining themselves. How many Europeans can claim such familiarity with the "Asian Other?" The fact that so many Asian students come to the West to study – and so few Europeans (Westerners) do so in Asia – is not a sign of the superiority of the Western mind and model. On the contrary, it impoverishes our mindset, if not our culture.

The need to open ourselves as Europeans to the Asian mind, and even to some different societal models, does not imply, however, that we should relinquish our values. The peace, compassion, and cooperation Asians are contemplating with such admiration are the direct product of values which some of them see as "Western," and that, yes, we regard as "universal."

Given Asia's rise, it is, of course, illusory for Europeans to consider their relations with the biggest Asian power, China, only through the prism of human rights. Moreover, Europe's ability to exert pressure on China is extremely limited at best, and may be least potent where Chinese domestic matters are concerned.

Nevertheless, Europeans should not be deterred by the Chinese government's anger at the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo. In the name of Europe's core values, all EU ambassadors to Norway should make a point of attending the Nobel award ceremony – which the imprisoned Liu cannot – despite China's call for them to stay away. It is simply a question of self-respect – and, ultimately, that of China.

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