

THE UN-AMERICAN UGLY AMERICANS

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While many people embrace the world's growing interconnectedness and prosperity as positive changes, others fear the influence of foreign values and newfound wealth. In Asia, people once blamed American corporations, media, and entertainment for corrupting Eastern cultures. However, now the threat seems to come from within Asia, in the form of Asian films, video games, and other homegrown consumer items. In the following article, Barbara Crossette describes some of the effects of globalization in Asia.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Drawing Conclusions

Why does Crossette say that Americanization can no longer be blamed for the changes happening in Asia?

On the outskirts of Mandalay, the heart of Burmese religious and cultural life, a kind of California suburb is taking shape, with expensive detached houses in landscaped gardens walled off from the city's less prosperous reality. A shopping mall can't be far behind.

Another sign of the Americanization of Asia? Not so, say the neighbors. The big white mansions of concrete and glass are neo-Thai in their inspiration, built with Burmese and Chinese money, at least some of it garnered from narcotics and the smuggling of Burmese gems and timber. Everything about this phenomenon is Asian. So are the construction companies clawing up virgin rain forests to build golf courses in Malaysia and the studios in Hong Kong and Bombay that make films violent enough to startle Hollywood—and to provoke a burgeoning Asian backlash against perceived threats to family values and decency.

Source of Evil

It used to be that when things started to unravel in almost any Asian country it was easy to finger the culprit: Americanization. Are families falling apart? Dig out the American divorce rates. Kids joining gangs? Talk about Los Angeles and American movies. Rock groups replacing the gamelan? Must be the imported TV programs. The environment in ruins? Blame New York's air conditioners. AIDS? That's a Western disease, the Thais once said confidently as more and more warehouse-sized "massage parlors" opened.

Now in cities, towns and satellite-dished villages across Asia—and in other parts of the world where rising incomes and greater access to goods and information are breeding consumerism and speeding modernization—it is getting much

harder to hold the West, particularly the United States, responsible for assaults on local cultures.

Worldwide communications—especially satellite television, the fax machine and the Internet—hasten the narrowing of cultural differences. Not everything novel comes from the West, even if most of these now-universal fashions were first popularized in richer Western countries. If trends are set by Japan, this is because the Japanese were the first to break into the top ranks of technology and trade, not only in the region but also worldwide. Others will follow in other regions.

An American diplomat said he was struck by this trend when a Korean radical wearing jeans and smoking an American cigarette lectured him on the perverse effects of American influence. Many Southeast Asians have abandoned traditional costumes for business suits not because Western business people dress that way but because the Japanese and Taiwanese do.

And Karaoke, Too

Take a walk in Phnom Penh almost any time of day, and there will be children sitting on the high stools of video-game parlors where the bloodthirsty fare is Japanese-produced. Express boats on Borneo's rivers show Asian-made films in which heroes kick around the faces of bad guys without even smudging their Italian shoes. In the remote Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, where television receivers are not allowed, the police blamed videotapes from Hong Kong, with their very slick and sociopathic violence, when a Buddhist abbot was murdered a few years ago by local criminals who planned to steal an unlocked temple's treasures.

All over South Asia, middle-class parents worry about the hugely prolific Indian popular film industry with its debased or caricatured women and those silk-shirted toughs living glamorous lives. As for karaoke and what it has done to traditional forms of local entertainment, the less said the better.

"I do believe that mindless imitation of Western patterns of development is an exceedingly serious problem, but you have to accept the responsibility for the fact that this can't happen unless the elite wants it," said Palagummi Sainath, author of "Everybody Loves a Good Drought," a sharp critique of government and the establishment in India, based on his reporting from some of the poorest villages in the country.

"It's a simplification to reduce everything to the word 'Westernization,' and a bit foolish to make the argument that anything and everything that comes from the West is bad," said Mr. Sainath, who added that his most influential and respected teachers in Madras were European Jesuits. "Millions of things have moved both ways over the centuries which we all live with and are comfortable with.

"What I see is something different," said Mr. Sainath. "The super-rich are seceding from their nations. So what you have is not a Western or East Asian or Southeast Asian or Chinese model. We are building enclaves of super-privilege. What you're having is not a global village but a series of global ghettos. The Western elite is not the sole villain."

But the myth of “Americanization” dies hard, says Francis Seow, a former Solicitor General of Singapore who has been at the Harvard Law School ever since he had a falling out with the country’s leader, Lee Kuan Yew, and with his conservative “Asian-values.” Mr. Seow went to jail for his outspokenness. Politicians, and a range of activists struggling to keep alive old third-world causes, continue to demonize the West. The Burmese military junta, now under an investment embargo by the Clinton Administration, is waging a strong anti-Western campaign in the Government-controlled media.

“Singapore leaders tend to speak smugly of family values as if they are an exclusive preserve of Asian countries,” Mr. Seow said. “I have personally seen American children who love and are respectful of their parents and elders, and I am told that in the heartland of America—the real America—these values are the norm rather than the exception.”

Many Asian-Americans resent Asian leaders talking about Asian values as much as they object to Americans stereotyping Asians as invulnerable over-achievers. “The Lee Kuan Yews talk as if there were an Asia that is homogeneous,” said Sumit Ganguly, a political scientist at Hunter College of the City University of New York. “As if the steppes of Central Asia were the same as the plains of Bengal and the plains of Bengal the same as the forests of Sarawak.”

In the culturally diverse United States, a politician, however attuned to anti-immigration or even anti-Asian sentiment, would not be likely to reach for the words “Easternization” or “Asianization” when immigrant Thais (some of them in the country illegally) are found running a slave-labor operation in southern California or Chinese and Vietnamese gang executions take place in lower Manhattan.

There is a new catchword in the developing world, however, to cover cultural wounds not believed to be strictly Western, Eastern or self-inflicted; the word is globalization. It wraps up all the fears of somehow losing control to foreigners, felt as much by Americans who hate the United Nations and immigrants as it is by Indians or Filipinos who feel threatened by the International Monetary Fund, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Joe Camel or Time Warner. That shrinking world everyone was so proud of a decade or so ago has become a cultural strangler.

India’s Elite

Francine Frankel, director of the Center for the Advanced Study of India at the University of Pennsylvania, thinks that fears of globalization are setting the stage for a new anti-Americanism among some elite groups in India, which will be the world’s most populous nation sometime early in the next century, because satellite television connects the poor not only to the advertising of goods and life styles (for better or worse) but also to ideas (realistic or not) of self-advancement.

“This is at the center of India’s political conflict, this challenge of the disadvantaged classes,” Ms. Frankel said. “Unrestricted globalization and the penetration of American culture exacerbates this kind of change. Consumerism is really an expression of egalitarianism. The upper castes see that as an imported alien value.”

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THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

Crossette shows how culture flows both ways today, not just from the United States to other parts of the world. Culture is exchanged among all different parts of the world through the worldwide information networks. The East influences the West at the same time that the West influences the East.