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An Asian Renaissance? Some Observations on Heng Siam-Heng's 'Asian Renaissance and Enlightenment'

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INTRODUCTION

Heng Siam-Heng in his article 'Asian Renaissance and Enlightenment – Problems and Prospects' (Heng 2007) explores the possibility that the recent political changes in Asia, especially in India and China, may provide the opportunity for an Asian renaissance and Enlightenment. In this rejoinder I would like to examine the major themes of this suggestive article, drawing out some of its important insights, and evaluating the extent to which it may lay the intellectual foundations for an Asian rebirth.

WHAT IS A REBIRTH?

It is perhaps inevitable that we are consumed by what seem to be pressing problems and concerns. What is necessary, even urgent, will always demand our immediate attention. Even when not required by circumstances, our focus tends to drift to a narrow and limiting scope and horizon. The first and striking virtue of Heng's paper is that in posing the question of an 'Asian Renaissance' he already succeeds in some of the tasks he sets himself in his article. To pose such a question forces us to change our perspective, to broaden our horizons, to look beyond our immediate, quotidian concerns to larger questions and issues that may not be immediately visible. Thus, in posing the question Heng compels us to move beyond the comfortably familiar, towards what is new and challenging. In the spirit of Kant, the last great Enlightenment figure whose motto was *sapere aude*, Heng asks us to have the courage to speculate, wonder, philosophise. He makes us question if we are already in the midst of an Asian renaissance, or if we are not, what is necessary to discern, even initiate such a transformation. The very first step of posing the question is in a sense already a part of a rebirth, an intellectual and spiritual liberation that lays the foundation for the subsequent argument of his article.

However, what are we to understand by an ‘Asian Renaissance’? Heng draws on ancient Greek, Chinese, Islamic and Indian examples to reveal some important insights into philosophical and cultural ‘rebirths’. Rebirths are not the province of any one people, culture, or religion, though various national or political centres will experience these transformations in different ways. Periods of relative stability may foster the arts and sciences, but rebirths are sustained and enriched by major and profound social, economic and political changes or transitions. Rebirths are inevitably a result of a crosscurrent of ideas, a confluence of insights with diverse sources that in challenging and confronting each other yield new approaches and formulations. Importantly, such periods of change and therefore, renaissance require individuals – philosophers, artists, the thoughtful pious, statesmen – to take the opportunity to pursue intellectual and spiritual rejuvenation or rebirth. Thus, a rebirth or renaissance is a complex and dynamic interplay of the social, political and economic with that of the institutional and the intellectual.

AN ASIAN RENAISSANCE?

In some ways, as Heng indicates, Asia has been in a constant state of intellectual challenge and invigoration. Chinese history in particular shows decisive periods of intellectual rejuvenation, due to the work of brilliant scholars, economic and political influence, and even the adoption of cheap means of reproducing written texts (Heng 2007:3). The present confluence of Western and Chinese traditions, evident in the modernization of China, is merely a contemporary expression of this heritage of transformation. Similar stories can be told of other countries in the region. Ancient mutual influences, facilitated through compacts and wars, western colonialism, even the free adoption of modern technological advances and innovations, show the spectrum of possible influence – from the near and proximate, to the global and international.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of these different expressions and articulations of rebirth, in China and in the region more generally, Heng is cautious in declaring a contemporary rebirth. He is aware of the considerable obstacles that may limit the possibility of an Asian renaissance.¹ The first major obstacle is a sort of intellectual chauvinism, a lack of clear-sightedness that, in celebrating and even venerating what is our own, makes us believe that what is ours is simply good, thereby making us less willing to learn from others.² The second is an openness to other influences and traditions that may make us seek the strange and unforeseen while making us deprecate the good we already possess. Familiarity may breed contempt, but we should not succumb to the temptation of copying without discrimination all things that are new and different. Thus, between these two obstacles, of an intransigent traditionalism and a dismissive progressivism, lies a more moderate and thoughtful approach to the problem of

change, innovation and rebirth. Significantly, such an approach is aware of the complexity of the nature of innovations, and that nothing is without tension and contradiction. Those who seek to adopt modern western technological innovation would do well to recall, for example, that the liberation of a scientific and commercial spirit that was initiated in the renaissance and subsequently secured in the Enlightenment took place only after a long and sometimes bitter engagement with an earlier classical, as well as religious perspective that questioned the merits of such innovations. As such, modern technology unavoidably continues to have at its core this tension between different ways of understanding nature, humanity and the role of reason in everyday life. Just as modernity is not linear and preserves hidden tensions and struggles, so all ideas (including ancient Chinese and Indian insights that are being retrieved and recovered) will reveal, after sufficient close attention, the complexities that animate them. Rebirths are sites of contest, struggle and victory, as well as mutual accommodation and rejuvenation.

In the light of the above, Heng's reservations regarding the possibility of an Asian rebirth or rejuvenation seem timely and prudent. But, perhaps in exercising such restraint he may be too cautious? Perhaps the political and economic changes that we are witnessing have already set into motion major philosophical and cultural transformations that are not immediately visible but will become so once we endeavour to look for them?

AN ASIAN REBIRTH IN MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE?

Though such major movements may be hard to discern generally, perhaps they are more visible in specific contexts. Are they evident in Malaysia or Singapore? Put in more ambitious and challenging terms, is it possible that Malaysia or Singapore may be the locus of such an Asian rebirth? If one thinks in simple terms of power and influence, such a view seems at best hopeful, at worst overambitious and overreaching. Yet one has only to think of the pivotal role of Florence in the European *renascimento* or rebirth, to be reminded of the contingent nature of such simple *real politic* calculations. Florence is widely regarded as the birthplace of that intellectual, cultural and spiritual rejuvenation that subsequently spread throughout Europe and the world, and which continues to influence us to this day. The fundamental transformations that took place in the arts, philosophy, literature and sciences are well known – one need only to think of Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Machiavelli – to be reminded of the extraordinary breadth and richness of this Florentine rebirth. Though the question 'Why Florence?' continues to challenge historians, sociologists and political scientists, one of the most important factors, in addition to the strategic and commercial power of Florence, was the Medici endorsement of such a renewal. The Medici, as rulers in Florence, generously sponsored artists and scholars,

thereby preserving for posterity their name and reputation, avoiding the fate of their contemporaries, who were perhaps as eminent but whose fate was a dusty obscurity. An example of Medici influence is telling: it was Cosimo de' Medici who in 1462 donated a villa at Creggi, near Florence, to Marsilio Ficino, on the understanding that he would dedicate himself to the interpretation of Platonic philosophy. This villa became the site of the new Platonic Academy where Ficino subsequently translated into Latin the Platonic corpus, as well as works by Plotinus, Porphyry, and Proclus.³

One can argue, of course, that Florence was an exception. However, a consideration of the intellectual inheritance that made Florence and the European renaissance possible confirms the importance of the dynamic interplay of the intellectual, political, and economic in initiating and sustaining such a rebirth. European renaissance owes much to the Arab scholars who preserved the Greek tradition, literally in the form of manuscripts, and more generally through commentaries and summaries. Greek and Hellenistic legacies in philosophy, science and medicine, along with Indian and Persian legacies in mathematics and literature were preserved in the Near East and Persia due to the support of the Abbasid caliphate (750-1285). Thus in the tenth and eleventh centuries translations and commentaries by al-Kindī, al-Rāzi, al-Fārābi, Avicenna and others sustained this philosophical tradition. In addition to the eastern parts of the Islamic caliphate, the western, especially Muslim Spain (al-Andalus) and its capital, Cordova, began to vie with Baghdad as the centre of learning, giving rise by the eleventh century to eminent philosophers such as Avempace, Ibn Ṭufayl and Averroes. Thus, Cordova and more generally Iberia became a bridge across which Arab-Greek philosophy and science crossed into Western Europe. It was through the commentaries and translations of Averroes that Aristotle was introduced into Europe, making possible Latin scholasticism and ultimately the renaissance.⁴ Here is it important to remind ourselves of the crucial role of political leaders in encouraging such a rebirth. It was al-Hakam II (961-976) who, in importing books from the East, made Cordova, with its famous library of 400 000 books a rival of Baghdad as a centre of learning. Importantly, it was the philosophic caliph Abk Ya'qūb Yusūf who encouraged Averroes to translate and comment on Aristotle (see generally Fakhry 2000)

Florence, then, is not unique. Cordova provides another instance of intellectual and cultural flourishing that is made possible by the wise dispensation of its leaders who, in encouraging learning and scholarship, are celebrated to this day for their magnanimity and wisdom. Florence and Cordova show the extraordinary influence even small countries or states may have, and the extent to which the efflorescence of thought they initiate can reach beyond their immediate borders, and indeed make claims beyond their specific place and time. Political and economic circumstances provide extraordinary opportunities; rebirths require practical initiatives to allow countries to benefit from crosscurrents

of thoughts, to retrieve and recover ancient wisdom while fostering the flourishing of new ones.

ASIAN RENAISSANCE DIALOGUES

What are these practical initiatives? Certainly both Singapore and Malaysia have placed learning and education to the forefront, establishing centres of learning, major libraries, and promoting scholarship more generally. What would be interesting at this stage is to explore and evaluate in a practical way the hypothesis that we now have a unique opportunity for an Asian renaissance, or perhaps the more contentious thesis that we are in the midst of such a transformation. One possible way this may be achieved, I would suggest, is to set into motion a concerted examination of the question of an Asian renaissance. The overarching theme is clear; what is needed is specific set of sub-questions or themes to allow us, almost as sailors, to take soundings, to measure the distance and the course, to see if we are soon to discover new continents. The questions I have in mind involve tensions or dynamics: between the modern and the secular; the challenge of technology to culture; the problem of tradition and progress; and the demands of a new civic education. Of course one can imagine many others. What is important is that these subsidiary questions or themes act as a lens, allowing us to focus on a specific aspect of the question of an Asian renaissance, in an attempt to form a larger picture of what is taking place culturally and intellectually regarding the recovery and transformation of the great traditions. Framed as East-West Dialogues, these discussions regarding Asian renaissance would initially be scholarly one- or two-day workshops where invited international scholars and experts would present papers on select themes. These dialogues would allow the West to engage with and appreciate traditions it may know only obscurely; it would certainly allow the East to understand the profound theological-political problems that shaped European political and philosophical thought and gave birth to modernity.⁵ Outstanding papers from these workshops, as well as select commissioned monographs, would be published for an international audience. Larger conferences open to a wider scholarly community could also form a part of the Dialogues. Of course the East-West Dialogues need not be confined to the academic community – artistic, musical, and cultural engagements could take place under this banner. It could, for example, form the basis for a *biennale* that could challenge the famous Venice *Biennale*. Whatever form they take, these measures are designed as a practical way to ask and test the profound question posed by Heng – are the economic, cultural and political changes in the region laying the ground for an Asian renaissance?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

eng Siam-Heng's article prompts a series of thought-provoking questions, ranging from the meaning and causes of 'rebirths', to the practical questions of how to discern and evaluate them. Heng is sensibly measured in his prognosis of a possible renaissance. His spirit of caution requires and mandates that we undertake to examine what he has ventured as a possibility: though major intellectual and cultural movements may not be readily visible, their importance and far-reaching influence demands that we take them seriously, as a matter of both theoretical and practical necessity. The political and ideological tectonic changes we are witnessing in Asia compel us to look closely, to see if we can discern, and perhaps in doing so even initiate, an Asian renaissance. Irrespective of the outcome, it is clear that Heng Siam-Heng's article poses a provocative challenge to scholars, artists and statesmen.

NOTES

- ¹ These include the possible culture of fear that imposes a stultifying uniformity on thought; the absence of a critical mass of scholars; the absence of unifying themes for discussion and contemplation, and finally, the lack of support for innovative ideas (Heng 2007: 118-119).
- ² In Plato's *Republic*, this problem is formulated in the amusing account of the 'philosophic dogs'. The spiritedness of dogs, in protecting what is theirs, makes them hostile to strangers, even those who may be friends, with much to offer (*Republic* 375a-376c)
- ³ Of course such a recovery inevitably met opposition. On the extent to which Christian as well as classical political thought was challenged and reformulated in the renaissance see Patapan (2006).
- ⁴ It is interesting to note that the Arab philosophy was taken most seriously by Jewish philosophers in Spain, due in large measure to the interest shown in the works of Averroes by the Jewish Aristotelian of Cordova, Moses Maimonides. For a general overview of these intellectual origins, and especially of Averroes, see Fakhry (2001, 129-138).
- ⁵ It is clear from our discussion that philosophically speaking it is not possible to use geographic measures, such as 'East' and 'West' to comprehend the character of intellectual and spiritual transformations. At best, these designations are approximations, shorthand expressions to capture the possibility of an 'Asian' renaissance (itself a problematic formulation) in contrast to the well-know European rebirth.

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