MONSOON WOULD LIKE TO THANK WAYNE MAK FOR HIS CONTRIBUTION.

Man Mo Temple In Hong Kong
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March 2005

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A Message from Monsoon's Co-Editor-in-Chief

On December 26, 2004, a natural disaster devastated the South Asian region. Under the Indian Ocean, a powerful earthquake struck between the Australian and Eurasian tectonic plates. The powerful tremors from the quake triggered a massive tsunami which spread thousands of kilometers over several hours. These waves, traveling at speeds of up to 500 mph, smashed into the coasts of Indonesia, Thailand, India, Malaysia, Burma, Sri Lanka, and Somalia. The tsunamis caused widespread destruction on a scale previously unseen in the region, killing hundreds of thousands of people, leaving thousands more homeless, and destroying property and infrastructure in excess of billions of dollars. On this 50-day anniversary of the tragedy, it is necessary to assess the terrible loss of life, the sweeping humanitarian efforts conducted by the international community, and the implications for the future.

The destructive effect the tsunamis had on the affected nations is beyond dispute. In terms of cold statistics, the numbers still retain their terrible impact: 111,171 people verified killed, 127,000 missing, 800,000 homeless without any shelter. Reconstruction costs over the next three years are estimated in excess of $4.5 billion dollars. The utter devastation wiped out roads, electricity, and other vital infrastructure. In seriously afflicted areas, whole towns and urban centers were totally destroyed. Such figures only begin to reveal the human suffering in the region. They don't reveal the stark choices: of parents forced to decide which child they could hold on to and save in the rushing floods. They don't show the hundreds of children who were suddenly orphaned. They cannot begin to describe the devastation, of the lives lost, the ordeals of the survivors, of the struggles future generations will have to rebuild.

In the wake of the tsunamis, the international response to the crisis has been immense. International donations throughout the world exceeded $1.4 billion dollars, with countries pledging money to the effort. Thanks to the efforts of the international community and the UN relief services, emergency aid was distributed in as effective a manner as possible, given the devastation to local transportation infrastructure. Despite these good signs, however, the task of rebuilding the damage left by the tsunamis is still a daunting one. Despite the generosity of the international community, it is still short of the 4.5 billion dollars estimated for rebuilding efforts. Much of the reconstruction funding and effort must be done by the governments of the countries affected by the crisis. Many of these governments, however, are corrupt and inefficient, resulting in poor responses to local needs and shameful incidents of government abuse. Recently in Sri Lanka, several local politicians were arrested on charges of using their positions to distribute aid solely to their supporters, accepting bribes in exchange for food. In other nations, accusations of corrupt officials stealing relief funds and supplies have triggered riots and violence. In response, the UN was forced to send food monitors and UN personnel to ensure proper aid distribution. The incidents make it clear that simply providing aid will not be enough to ensure proper rebuilding efforts in these countries.

Given the response to the tsunami crisis, it is clear that the international community is committed to aiding nations afflicted by the disaster. It is important, however, to ensure that international assistance is not limited to simply sending aid and letting the situation mend itself. International monitoring of aid distribution, long term commitment to rebuilding the damage, and global scrutiny of the relief efforts will ensure that regional governments are under consistent pressure to ensure fair treatment for the tsunami victims. Already international cooperation has yielded results in the form of the development of a tsunami early warning system for the entire region. May this spirit of collaboration continue as the painful process of rebuilding shattered lives goes on.

Elliott Veloso
Co-Founder and Co-Editor-in-Chief
East Asian and Comparative Ethics: the Case of Filial Piety

- by Philip J. IVANHOE

My research focuses on East Asian and Western philosophy and religion; I have a particular interest in ethics. I have published translations of classical works of Chinese philosophy, and much of my research begins with the study of such original texts. One aspect of my work is the effort to bring traditional East Asian philosophy into conversation with contemporary Western ethics. For example, I have written a paper for a forthcoming volume on applied virtue ethics that argues for filial piety as a virtue. For my contribution to *Monsoon*, I would like first to describe some of my motives for engaging in such work. I will conclude with a sketch of my paper.

The virtue of filial piety may seem a tad out of date to many modern Western readers. But instead of accepting this response as authoritative, we should see that it raises several issues that are part of why this topic is particularly important. The first thing to ask is why is it that this particular virtue might strike certain readers as less or unimportant? While to some this may seem like a natural response, that alone is not a good reason to accept such a response as decisive. If, as many philosophers argue, virtues are traits of character that help one fare well in the face of a common set of human challenges, then filial piety should be a central concern. For in one way or another, as human beings, we all have to work our way through the special relationship we have with our parents. While traditional beliefs about filial piety may be out of date, the fact that humans have an enduring, distinctive, and emotionally charged relationship with their parents remains as true today as it was in the past and as true in the West as it is in the East.

The second point that needs to be made is that while filial piety may strike many modern Western readers as a bit old fashioned, this is certainly not the case for readers in East Asian communities and many other people throughout the world. Many Chinese intellectuals find it quite odd that Western ethical philosophers for the most part disregard issues like filial piety and instead seem obsessed with the obscure and apparently intractable metaphysical problems associated with topics like abortion. The inordinate amount of attention paid to abortion in contemporary philosophical writing strikes educated observers outside the West, and some within it, as a matter of anthropology—a manifestation of the Judeo-Christian context of Western philosophy—than evidence of the overriding philosophical importance of this particular problem. These two points offer clear illustrations of the value of cross-cultural studies of the virtues and are good examples of the kinds of concerns that motivate, guide, and sustain my own work. By bringing these cross-cultural differences to light, I hope to broaden our own self-understanding as well as our understanding of East Asian traditions.

In my essay, I first explore and discard some of the traditional justifications for filial piety. This part of the paper seeks to identify some of the reasons people in early China thought one had an overriding duty to obey, respect, and love one’s parents while alive and sacrifice to and revere them after they have died. I argue that what I call the “genetic argument”—the idea that we owe our parents filial piety out of gratitude for their begetting us—is not at all persuasive. Similarly, I do not think the religious obligation of continuing one’s family line is a secure basis for grounding anything like a duty of filial piety. While these arguments have been important for traditional views about filial piety and remain important for some people today, they do not offer compelling philosophical reasons for most modern people. They also suffer from the excessive demands that they place upon filial children. Such a conception of filial piety seems to trump every other ethical concern and leaves little room for the reasonable interests of even very good children.

If we abandon these aspects of the traditional conception of filial piety, there still remains a wealth of good reasons for regarding filial piety as an important virtue. A virtue is a trait of character that enables us to fare well in the various spheres of human endeavor. Having and exercising the virtues makes our lives and the lives of those around us better. And so courage is a virtue because human beings cannot avoid severe and dangerous challenges in the course of living a decent life. Courage enables us to pursue the good in the face of such threats; it helps our lives and the lives of those around us go better. Filial piety enables us to fulfill, in the most satisfying and reasonable manner possible, the particular challenges governing the relationship we have with our parents. Since my account eschews the genetic argument, it applies equally well to parents who adopt a child as it does to biological parents (though there are good reasons to see special obligations in regard to the latter). According to my view, filial piety is a natural and satisfying response to the protection, nurture, attention, support, and love that good parents provide for their children. It is often focused through a sense of gratitude for all that they have done for one, but its deepest and more secure foundation is the recognition and appreciation of their love. Filial piety is distinctive because parents offer a unique range of care. They not only protect and nurture us in direct ways; they also...
It is no secret that the west of China is a land of poverty. According to a study conducted by the Asian Development Bank, “in the Western Region [of China], both urban and rural income, especially the latter, are below the national average” and that 61.7 percent of the 16.4 million counties in the Western Region were categorized as “poverty counties” by government standard in 1999. And as the rest of the country continues to enjoy higher rates of growth than the western provinces, it is almost unquestionable that the Chinese government, according to Premier Wen Jiabao, considers the Great Western Development (Xibu Dakaifa) as a “critical strategic decision” and as a “great project to alleviate poverty.”

Josh Schrei, a director of Students for a Free Tibet, describes the inauguration of China’s Great Western Development: “In October 2000, an international economic conference was held in Beijing. Among the invited guests were Oil company representatives, World Bank executives, members of the media, China Communist party officials and a host of international businessmen and businesswomen. The conference was the inauguration of Xibu Dakaifa, the Chinese government’s Great Western Development plan – a massive [effort] designed to attract foreign investment and build infrastructure in the poor western regions of China.” Oil company representatives and international businessmen – are these the appropriate people to whom China should look to carry out its “great project to alleviate poverty”?

Since the inauguration of the Great Western Development, “the market has been flooded with books [that] have addressed the western region as a whole or in part from a variety of perspectives,” and many scholars in the field have analyzed the project from conventional macroeconomic perspectives. Emphasis is placed on such issues as financial investments, market efficiency, resource mobilization, transportation, infrastructure, and technology. Indeed, all these macroeconomic factors are vital to any development process, yet the development of China’s west is far too complicated and unique a matter to be generalized by some conventional macroeconomic approaches. “It is a huge, complex, and systemic project,” according to Professor Y.M. Yeung of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, “that demands vast inputs of resources, political will at every level, and the support of people within and outside of China.” In other words, the Great Western Development is a multi-dimensional issue that involves not just economic but political and social concerns.

One important fact about China’s Western Region is that it cannot be viewed as a unified entity. It is a culturally diverse region where the situation in one village could be drastically different from that of even
its closest neighbor, and hence it is dangerous to treat the Western Region as a unified entity and to have policies “imposed from the top down and failing to address key local needs”\(^7\). Especially in rural areas, where “villagers thought and acted on the basis of inherited institutions and values of lineage, religion, and village, of traditional norms embedded in cherished customs,”\(^8\) unified policies imposed from the top down are usually incompatible in many local areas.

Because most parts of China’s Western Region are made up of remote and hilly areas that have been virtually isolated due to the household registration (\textit{hukou}) system, everyday lives in most Chinese villages are highly dependent on their own local cultures and networks. “Political culture [and] local networks,” according to Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, “were too deeply structured to be readily destroyed by particular policies,”\(^9\) and this is particularly true in the Western Region because villages tend to be more remote and isolated geographically. Thus, policies that are set from a macro-perspective would most likely be impertinent to many local situations.

Moreover, because many rural villagers in the Western Region are still living on the margin of subsistence, it is worrisome that some policies imposed from the top down could perhaps be “extremely detrimental to people living in the western regions.”\(^10\) For instance, the Asian Development Bank reports that “average household size in the Western Region poverty counties is higher, and the higher ratio of household members to workers partly contributes to the lower per capita incomes [in those counties].”\(^11\) A central policy that blindly encourages rural villagers to participate in constructing urban infrastructure may sharply reduce the productivity of these “poverty counties” and push those unproductive household members to live below the subsistence level.

Such situations are not unprecedented in the history of contemporary China. In the early phase of Chairman Mao Zedong’s Great Leap Forward campaign from 1958-61, agricultural production in many provinces across counties fell dramatically, while industrial output was still on the rise. In Hunan, for example, gross domestic output (GDP) of primary industries experienced a 48.9 percent drop from 1958-59\(^12\), while GDP of secondary and tertiary industries was rising rapidly in the same years because productive laborers were drawn from the fields to join the steel production campaign. On the macro-level, the GDP of the province rose by 9.84 percent from 1958-59, but starvation began to hit most rural villages, whose villagers were living on the margin of subsistence to begin with, as agricultural production fell.

Thus, aggregate economic development may seem positive on the surface. However, certain policies set from a macro-perspective may be extremely detrimental to local people, particularly those who are living in rural areas at the subsistence level, if local situations are not taken into serious consideration. Therefore, while China’s Great Western Development aims at bringing prosperity to the entire Western Region, attention and priority must be placed on policymaking and execution at the local level, while macro-level policies should be viewed as complements to those that are specific to local areas. Instead of perceiving the Western Region as a unified entity that will undergo a single economic development effort, the region should be seen as an aggregate of millions of unique areas that each require specific development policies set from a micro-perspective.

Another important fact to note about China’s Western Region is that unlike regions in many other developing countries, its economic development is not stagnated and that average household income of the whole region has been rising steadily. The Asian Development Bank acknowledges that “the [PRC] government has had considerable success in reducing poverty, especially rural poverty,”\(^14\) yet in the same study it is shown that a “widening gap between rural and urban incomes points to rising inequality.”\(^15\)

The findings of the Asian Development Bank explain why, while big cities like Chongqing are enjoying the virtues of rising capital investments and modernization, “poverty in remote, hilly areas is widespread and intractable.”\(^16\) The widening gap between income groups in the Western Region points to a critical flaw in China’s Great Western Development campaign – that its attention is paid to economic advancement rather than to the problem of allocation.

China’s Western Region is not a piece of scrap paper. Rather, social, political, and economic circumstances have been “crystallized” in “shapes” of regional inequalities, and these “shapes” are not likely to be manipulated through some general economic development policies. As Professor Y.M. Yeung quoted Wang Shaoqiang and Hu An’gang: “When the government has no intention to reduce regional disparities in the country, regional gaps are unlikely to narrow ... Only when the state is both willing and able to intervene on behalf of poor regions may regional disparities decline.”\(^17\) In fact, the potential success of the Great Western Development could very possibly be doomed if priority is placed on macro-economic advancement over the problem of allocation, as Wang and Hu further warn: “The government may be able to persuade people that some must get rich first so that everyone will eventually get rich. But if it persists in failing to distribute the gains from reforms more or less
evenly, and if the gap between those who flourish and those who stagnate becomes unacceptably large, the moral foundations of the regime will be shaken.”

Especially when millions of people are still living on the margin of subsistence, resource and output allocation could turn out to be a life-or-death issue for many of those who live under severe poverty. Failure to effectively distribute resources and output across regions could possibly lead to such subsistence crises as those seen during the Great Leap Forward. During the Great Leap Forward famine, large-scale starvation in many rural villages erupted while crop yields were still increasing. This paradox demonstrates well the importance of resource and output allocation to those who live on the margin of subsistence over the performance of economic development in the grand scheme. People have to eat before they attempt to get rich – and hence it is critical to create an effective and fair system of allocation and to consider its success as a prerequisite to any sort of economic advancement.

Another critical flaw in much existing literature on the Great Western Development is that many scholars have been looking at the project from purely economic perspectives. The shortcoming of such literature is that it fails to acknowledge the simple fact that policies in China are ultimately political decisions at every level, and that conventional western economic theories are usually not applicable in the Chinese economy.

Thus, the ultimate success of the Great Western Development will depend entirely on how political institutions, particularly those on the local level, behave. A similar argument, though in a different context, is made by Professor Gary Jefferson of Brandeis University and summarized by Steven M. Goldstein: “Gary Jefferson has suggested that much of the reform initiative has come from the ‘bottom up’ as the central party/government restricts its role to ‘enabling reforms’ dependent on ‘local initiatives.’ In this view an understanding of the course of China’s economic reform requires a perspective that goes beyond a preoccupation with reform strategies to include ‘initial institutional conditions.’”

Professor Jefferson’s notion of including “initial institutional conditions” in the study of China’s economic reform leads to a broader concept of “path dependence,” which is “part of a broader approach known variously as ‘institutionalism’ or ‘historical institutionalism’ whose fundamental hypothesis is that ‘institutions are not just another variable … [rather they] structure political situations and leave their own imprint on political outcomes.’ Institutions are ‘sticky’ and institutional inertia means that ‘history matters,’ as the ‘shadows of the past’ embodied institutional arrangements continue to shape present possibilities.” If this hypothesis of the concept of “path dependence” is confirmed, then political institutions, rather than economic policies, should become the foremost important issue in the Great Western Development.

Indeed, according to Joseph Fewsmith, “there is a growing belief in China today that social issues (as well as other such related issues as corruption) cannot be effectively addressed without political reform of one sort or another.” In particular, it is evident that political institutions at the local level are not ready to take on the challenge of the Great Western Development. Linda Jakobson concludes that “grassroot political institutions [in Chinese villages] were in disarray. Relations between villagers and village officials were rapidly deteriorating … Arbitrary control by clans and secret societies was on the rise.” A State Council report in early 1992 warned that 30 percent of the Party cells in the countryside had collapsed. Another 60 percent were extremely weak and disorganized.

Professor Ralph Thaxton, Professor of Political Science at Brandeis University, gives insight on how Party leadership in Chinese villages has evolved through the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, which further supports the need for institutional reforms before carrying out massive economic projects in the Western Region: “[The] arbitrary, brutal, and corrupted work-style [of local cadres during these periods] … had defined the work-style for the local parties for years to come.” Indeed, without the appropriate political institutions as prerequisites, any economic development plans are doomed to fail in China’s Western Region, where politics is still the most decisive factor in any social issue.

From an overall perspective, the success of China’s Great Western Development depends entirely on how the problems of allocation and political institutional reforms are solved from a micro-perspective. Only after such prerequisites are met may the government’s plans of macroeconomic development be implemented successfully and meaningfully.

Endnotes
U.S. Promotion of Human Rights in China

- by Kassian POLIN

As the world’s only superpower that has openly embraced human rights ideals longer than any Third World, newly industrializing or reforming Communist country, the United States has constantly portrayed itself as the proverbial city on a hill to be emulated by others, especially in the controversial area of human rights. America in many ways has been in a unique position to do so, though the results of the nation’s efforts to advance human rights abroad have been mixed.

The U.S.’s advocacy of human rights has granted the nation a high level of political and moral authority in the international arena. The distinguished American historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. once proclaimed that “the United States was founded on the proclamation of ‘unalienable’ rights, and human rights ever since have had a peculiar resonance in the American tradition.” Indeed, the U.S. commitment to human rights dates from the Declaration of Independence and the foundation of the nation. America has always had a deeply rooted belief in the importance of developing and maintaining democratic governments that are subject to the rule of law, and which respect and protect individual liberties.

Since the end of World War II, the U.S. has been without equal in articulating a vision of international human rights. Whether crafting the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, insisting on including human rights in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, compiling the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices since 1977, or continuing to push for freedoms and rights worldwide, the U.S. has been the single most vocal country in shaping the human rights agenda. Promoting democracy and protecting the individual against the excesses of the state have been official U.S. policy. Washington’s distinctive historical propensity to define its foreign policy interests in idealistic, salvationist terms has been demonstrated most forcefully by President Bush’s second Inaugural Address. Among the advanced industrialized democracies, Japan and Germany have historical records that tend to undermine any leadership role in defense of such values. With “international human rights (being) the world’s first universal ideology,” the U.S. indeed seems to be uniquely qualified to serve as defender of these widely accepted ideals.

America’s vast global strategic resources and international prestige are also key strengths in its push for the advancement of human rights. Since the Carter administration, in which human rights were for the first time openly proclaimed as an integral part of
U.S. foreign policy, Washington has constantly used its immense global clout to influence foreign governments in raising human rights standards. The U.S. frequently uses symbolic gestures, such as the holding of public meetings with prominent dissidents, the establishment of various military contacts, and initiation of close and cooperative relationships with human rights nongovernmental organizations. Transfers of advanced technology are made to governments working to improve their records, along with sizable amounts of economic aid. Sanctions have been applied on human rights grounds, which aim to disassociate the U.S. from those governments deemed to have violated American civil rights standards and to gain influence with the more progressive political forces in the countries concerned.

Such factors mean that there is hardly a government that can afford to ignore the issue of human rights once there is active American engagement. U.S. human rights policies have contributed much towards national policy debates and to the development of rights organizations and movements worldwide. At the same time, these policies serve to further enhance American political influence. The collapse of communism stripped away the ideological rationale of U.S. foreign policy, which had relied upon the Marxist system for reflexive self-definition to justify U.S. leadership of the “free world.” Using the ideal of human rights to fill the vacuum in the U.S. ideological arsenal, Washington is able to use the universal principle as a transnational platform to project foreign policy. This approach, together with unique American influence in the human rights field, seems to constitute a virtuous cycle to further entrench Washington’s strengths in the international political system.

One must understand that what is preached is not what is necessarily practiced, however. According to Mr. Pat Holt, ex-chief of staff of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the issue of human rights is “possibly the most tangled web in American foreign policy.” Though the U.S. was strongly supportive of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it went to great lengths to emphasize the document’s nonbinding and aspirational character. Fear of international scrutiny of American domestic civil rights practices in the South and elsewhere loomed large in Washington’s calculations. The issue of human rights was downplayed by successive administrations, as American priorities shifted towards the adoption of moralistic anticommunism towards the Soviet empire and Third World countries. This was best demonstrated by the Nixon administration, whose secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, argued that the issue of human rights was an intrusion into the calculus of geo-strategy.

Even Jimmy Carter, the firmest champion of human rights, resisted Congress’s efforts on numerous occasions to place internationally recognized human rights as a relatively distinct issue back on the foreign policy agenda. The president sought to act only where major strategic or economic interests were not at stake, such as in authoritarian Latin American regimes like Uruguay, Nicaragua, Chile and others. Congress, galvanized by executive failures in Vietnam and Watergate, asserted itself on U.S. foreign policy. It forced Carter to support an economic embargo against Uganda, and pressured the president to protect human rights in geopolitically sensitive regions such as the Philippines and South Korea through legal and binding means. The Reagan administration, under the guidance of the Kirkpatrick Doctrine, explicitly advocated preferential treatment for authoritarian allies over communist adversaries. A weakened Congress failed to successfully challenge the human rights policies of the executive office, which forcefully proceeded on the basis of American exceptionalism and Cold War realpolitik. The subsequent Bush and Clinton administrations, which oversaw the disintegration of the Soviet Union, had to contend with the rise of China within the system of the “free world.” As we shall see, human rights would once again be relegated to secondary importance.

All of the above examples serve to illustrate several weaknesses of the U.S.’s role in advancing human rights. The challenges towards effective and consistent U.S. human rights policy formation include the mounting tensions between human rights and commercial as well as security interests, and conflicts within the American political process regarding human rights policymaking. Some theorists have noted that the importance of human rights overrides other policy considerations. This might indeed be true in stable domestic politics, where the central government controls the legitimate use of force and where independent judicial systems serve to assert judgment on conflict of policies and conflict of rights.

In the nation-state system, however, national security is naturally the top priority for any rational government. One would be prudent to consider to what extent, and in what ways, human rights considerations can be implemented within security policy. Contemporary U.S. involvement in such issues, at least from the executive perspective, indicates that specific human rights have not been implemented but ignored. At the same time, human rights are high visibility issues that bring political rewards for the legislature, which finds close allies among media and church groups. These usually conflicting tendencies between the American branches of government could send contradictory signals to the international community that would undermine the credibility of America’s commitment to human rights issues.
Indeed, there are many other limitations – and opportunities – that the U.S. must face with its leadership in promoting human rights, as we shall see in the case of China. During the Tiananmen crackdown of 1989, which seriously disrupted Sino-American relations in the midst of powerful American democratic and human rights rhetoric, the elder President Bush decided to secretly send Brent Scowcroft, his National Security Advisor, and Lawrence Eagleburger, his Deputy Secretary of State, to assure Beijing that America’s newly imposed economic sanctions were temporary and that bilateral economic ties would not be jeopardized. At the same time, Bush approved the sale of Hughes Aircraft communications satellites to be launched by Chinese rockets, and asked the Export-Import Bank to resume lending to American firms engaged in business with China.

In his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in 1992, presidential candidate Bill Clinton denounced the Bush, Sr. administration’s apparent lack of interest in human rights and its intention to conduct “business as usual” with Beijing post-Tiananmen. Clinton promised that he would not “coddle tyrants from Baghdad to Beijing” if elected president, and would critically review China’s most-favored-nation (MFN) status, with a view to attaching tough standards on human rights. Clinton’s proposal stood in marked contrast to the policy of Bush, who favored unconditional support for Beijing’s MFN status. Yet in hindsight, one could see that pronouncements like Clinton’s were more notable for their political effect than for any real impact they had on policy.

Indeed, once Clinton took office, his “New Democrat” administration’s belief in economic liberalism, “enlightened” self-interest, and a renewed trust in multilateral institutions and internationalism drove the U.S. to abandon its initial policy of tying China’s MFN status to progress on human rights. Considerable political clout was wielded by U.S. corporations eager to crack the Chinese market and key economic agencies, such as the Department of the Treasury, the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) and the Commerce Department. The Clinton administration’s policy switched from “linkage” to “comprehensive engagement,” which awkwardly dictated that the White House would unequivocally support the annual renewal of China’s MFN status when it was voted upon by Congress. The unanimous refusal by all of China’s global trading partners from Japan to Australia to link politics with economics undermined America’s effectiveness and credibility in its human rights efforts as well.

In the spring of 1999, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji visited the U.S. and elevated the U.S.-China relationship to a new level, particularly through the negotiations of China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), which succeeded later that year. George W. Bush initially characterized China as a “strategic competitor,” instead of Clinton’s “strategic partner.” Even so, the Republican president acknowledged that in terms of overall trade policy and supporting China’s WTO candidacy, he was in “complete agreement” with his predecessor’s policies. Though terrorism, post-September 11, 2001, has been a new factor bringing the two nations together, economic relations – which clearly override the human rights agenda – will certainly remain a prominent feature of Sino-American ties.

More importantly, China has successfully twisted the rules of the human rights game against the U.S. Beijing, by arguing that human rights should be deferred pending economic development instead of heeding strict American demands for immediate reform, has waged highly effective campaigns to prevent annual U.S.-sponsored resolutions from reaching the floor of the UN Human Rights Commission. In fact, the U.S., which is a founding member of the Commission, was ousted from the group in 2001 because Beijing’s stance resonated with many of the representatives, among other things. The U.S. definition of human rights – which consists of civil and political rights – is much narrower than those of many of its international democratic allies, and it represents a failure by Washington to relate to less affluent, less individualistic societies in the light of American exceptionalism. One must note, however, that the forceful rationalization of human rights by China, as well as by other nations, reflects a universal acceptance of the promotion of human rights as a beneficial force. In the end, this is to the credit of America’s successful global commitment to the human rights cause.

In his farewell address, Carter declared that “America did not invent human rights... Human rights invented America.” Indeed, human rights as a relatively distinct issue is there to stay on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. The Nixon-Kissinger preference for treating human rights as a strictly domestic issue has been repudiated as much by Republicans as by Democrats. The U.S.’s strengths in promoting human rights are quite real and will continue to help shape the global agenda. Washington’s weaknesses, both internal and external, are just as substantial, though. With its current waging of war on terror, the U.S. is showing numerous signs of eroding and violating human rights in Afghanistan, Iraq and within its own borders, as reported by agencies such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. These are extraordinary times that require extraordinary effort by the U.S. to set its own house in order, in response to terrorism and to demands by the community of nations. This must be done if the U.S. is to effectively continue its crusade for human rights in an
age of globalization and democratization. Jimmy Carter would surely approve.

Kassian POLIN ('05) is a final year student at Brandeis University majoring in International & Global Studies and Economics, and minoring in Social Justice and Social Policy.

Vietnam, my country
- by Mai LE

“Why were we born in Vietnam and not in a rich country like America?” I once asked my mother when I was a kid. It was a question that, while growing up, I myself found the answer to without realizing it.

I was born in Vietnam, one of the poorest countries in the world, the country of an S shape that has just recovered from centuries of Chinese invasion, decades of French occupation and years of bombardment by Americans. Many of our family’s dinner conversations were of wartime stories my parents told about their childhood. I will never forget one story that my mother told me. She said that when the Americans bombed North Vietnam, each house had an underground shelter. Every time they heard the announcement, “The enemy’s planes will come in five minutes,” from the loudspeakers on the streets, everyone, regardless of what they were doing, would hide in the shelters in hopes of surviving. While children and the elderly were evacuated to the countryside to avoid the bombings, the adults stayed on in Hanoi to continue working. As a child, my mother wrote to her mother who was working in the city, “When you visit me, could you bring me a piece of meat just the size of a matchbox please?” She also told me how she rode her bike frantically back to Hanoi after each bombing trying to find her parents, and make sure they were still alive.

If one were to live in Vietnam and witness the consequences of war thirty years after it has ended, one would understand that war cannot be justified and that there is no such thing as a good war. Even when the war ends, its effects persist. Even now, in Vietnam, children are born everyday with birth defects because their parents were infected by Agent Orange. You can see veterans who lost their legs or arms begging on the streets. Numerous mothers who lost their husbands and sons in the war live in loneliness and suffering in their olden days. Poverty, suffering, grief, and bitterness are ubiquitous. My mom told me that my grandparents could have immigrated to France during the French occupation if they had wanted to. I asked her disappointedly, “Why didn’t they?” Her answer was simple, “They love Vietnam.”

My parents survived the war; they studied and grew up in the midst of all the bombings and poverty. I was too young to understand the war and the suffering it caused, and I could not figure out how people could possibly live when they knew they could get killed any time. I asked stupidly, “Why didn’t we just give up to the French or Americans and enjoy the prosperity they bring?” My mom explained, “We are a nation. We don’t want to be separated or colonized. We want freedom and unification.”

My parents hardly made ends meet when they raised me, but they inspired me to have dreams and ambitions to reach higher. My father recalled how they saved just enough money each week to take me to a Pho stall on the street, and buy me a bowl of Pho noodles while they fed me and watched me eat. Only after I had had enough would he finish the portion remaining in the bowl. My grandfather, while babysitting for me when I was a toddler, would write endless lines of “Professor Le Suong Mai” on a piece of scratch paper. It was his dream that I pursue the education he had to give up. My parents never let me have what I wanted because they wanted me to learn to stand on my own feet as they did.

When I was eight years old, I came across some view books of universities abroad, and could not believe how such beautiful places could exist compared to the old broken desks, chairs, and blackboards in the classrooms in Vietnam. I asked my mom out of curiosity, “What is the best university in the world?” She said it was Oxford, and I told myself as a joke that I wanted to go to Oxford. Of course, it was just out of the question for any poor Vietnamese at that time to study abroad. My mom just said, “Study hard and all your dreams will come true.” Ten years later, I was holding an acceptance letter from Oxford University, only having to give up the offer in tears because I could not get a scholarship to attend the school.

I did not learn to love my country and become more concerned about social justice, poverty, and peace until I went abroad. My first awareness of my Vietnamese identity came from the foreigners’ “WOW” reaction when I said, “I am from Vietnam.” While attending high school in England, I faced some unpleasant experiences as a foreigner. I was frustrated to see how some lucky students in rich countries take their education for granted. If the poor Vietnamese students who were starved of education were given the money and opportunities, they could come to do great things in their lives. Despite this, I came to like Westerners in general the more I made friends with them. My teachers in England told me how they participated in demonstrations against the war when they were young.
I learned that most Americans protested to end the war, and understood that American soldiers who served their country in the war did not know that they were sent to kill innocent people. In addition, for the first time, I met some Vietnamese abroad, whom we call Viet kieu and look down upon at home for leaving the country and supporting the Americans during the war. Nam, whom I met at Brandeis, took great efforts to help poor children in Vietnam through fundraising activities in the US. He has never seen Vietnam. As I got to know the Viet kieus and understand their points of view and their reasons for fleeing the country, I tried to tolerate our differences and relinquish my prejudice against them. Throughout my three years abroad, I have constantly fought within myself to accept that some of my beliefs and values have changed. I hope I have changed for the better.

My friends and I were the first generation born in peace. We grew up full of ambition and dreams, hungry for knowledge, and enjoyed our country’s freedom for which our parents shed their blood. We try very hard for a better future, and many of us have earned scholarships to study abroad. Some have expressed their desire to return home and contribute to Vietnam after graduating from college. However, many refuse to do so. They think that Vietnam is too poor a country to provide them with the opportunity to fully develop their potential. I, however, agree with J. F. Kennedy that we should, “Ask not what your country can do for you but ask what you can do for your country.” What is the use of getting a good education if you cannot contribute to your country? If all talented people go away, who will help our country? I want to set up a charity one day to help the poor in Vietnam, to open a university to bring quality education to poor students, and to help reconcile Vietnamese people from the wounds and misunderstanding the war has created.

I have found the answer to my childhood question. I was lucky to be born in Vietnam to see so much more of life, to appreciate life and peace. It is also my goal to help my country escape from poverty and suffering. I dream of strolling down a narrow sidewalk in the afternoon, feeling the earthly smell of beef noodle in the air, seeing the sidewalk café lit by a dim white light, watching the street vendors making a living and seeing innocent schoolgirls in white ao dai.

*Mai LE (*’07) is a second year student at Brandeis University majoring in Biophysics and Economics.*

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**Poppies Bloom and Chaos Spreads in Afghan Countryside**

- by Baya HARRISON

The Golden Crescent is the large swath of land that traces the contours of Afghanistan’s borders with Iran and Pakistan. The “golden” tint of the Crescent does not refer to the natural wealth of the lands or the rich cultures that inhabit them. The only gold in the region is the fortune acquired from the cultivation of opium and the exportation of its deadly derivative, heroin.

Moderate opium consumption has been an Afghan tradition for several millennia. Exportation of heroin, however, is an entirely modern development, springing from the political turmoil of the Cold War era. The 1973 coup that deposed Afghanistan’s monarch also plunged the country into chaos for the next three decades. Civil war erupted in 1978, triggering the punishing Soviet intervention of 1979-89. In the midst of the wars ravaging Afghanistan, the heroin trade flourished. The Soviet practice of mining irrigation ditches and fruit groves forced Afghan farmers to rely on crops requiring less water and yielding a quick return.

At the time of the Soviet withdrawal, annual opium production stood at 1,200 metric tons. When the Taliban seized power in 1996, opium production had reached 2,200 metric tons. The soaring amounts of heroin brought increased international pressure on Afghanistan, leading the Taliban to ban opium cultivation in 2000. By destroying opium fields and intimidating farmers, the Taliban reduced the 2001 harvest to only 200 metric tons, a 17-year low.

Two factors led to the resurgence of opium production in recent years. First, the steep reduction in opium supply sent prices soaring, increasing the plant’s allure to poor farmers. Second, in the shadow of the 9/11 attacks and an impending American invasion, Afghan farmers recognized that the Taliban would soon lose their ability to enforce the opium ban. Farmers turned to opium in unprecedented numbers.¹

Coming to power on the heels of the Taliban, Hamid Karzai outlawed the production and trafficking of opium. Though Karzai’s government has made elimination of the drug economy a top priority, Afghanistan currently bears the unenviable title of the world’s largest exporter of heroin.

In November 2004, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) published an exhaustive survey documenting the daunting scope of the Afghan drug trade.² While opium cultivation exists in all 34 provinces, it is concentrated in the country’s periphery: Badakhshan province in the north, Nangarhar

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¹ In 2005, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that Afghanistan accounted for 87% of the world’s opium production.

² The UNODC estimated that Afghanistan produced 9.5 metric tons of heroin in 2004, more than double the amount produced in 2003.
in the east, and Helmand and Kandahar in the south. Production is also on the rise. An estimated 356,000 families are involved in opium farming, a 35% increase above the 2003 level. Total land area under cultivation rose sharply from 80,000 hectares in 2003 to 131,000 hectares in 2004, a 64% increase. While actual opium production increased by only 17%, the disproportionate increase resulted from crop disease and drought rather than counter narcotics operations. The 4,600 metric tons of opium produced by Afghanistan in 2004 equaled the entire world supply of opium in 2003. This should come as no surprise, as Afghanistan currently produces 87% of the world’s opium, 10% of the United States’ heroin, and 95% of Europe’s heroin.

The path by which Afghan heroin travels to Western Europe is long and treacherous, promising both great perils and great rewards for those who embark on it. Rural Afghan farmers collect the resin secreted by the opium poppy at the end of its three-month life cycle. This resin is sold to refineries in Afghanistan and Pakistan where it is processed into heroin. Traffickers carry the heroin through neighboring Central Asian states to the north of Afghanistan. Organized crime syndicates in Central Asia and Russia transport the heroin to Eastern European states such as Poland, and local dealers transfer the drug to buyers in affluent Western European states such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. With a single gram fetching a price of $150 on the streets of London, heroin makes for an expensive pastime. The true costs of the international heroin trade, however, far exceed the dent made in addicts’ pocketbooks.3

While few Afghans actually use heroin, the allocation of a large portion of the country’s resources to the illicit drug trade has shackled Afghanistan’s economy and political culture to the will of parties, with a vested interest in a destabilized state. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime places the value of the 2004 opium export crop at $2.8 billion, equivalent to 60% of Afghanistan’s 2003 gross domestic product. These revenues fuel the war machines of local strongmen. As these warlords gain power, networks of arms dealers and corrupt government officials arise in a symbiotic relationship, each feeding off the chaos perpetuated by the other. The inevitable result is a self-sustaining cycle of instability and violence, all financed by euros, pounds, and dollars.

State failure looms ominously as a possible outcome of Afghanistan’s thriving drug economy. A state is said to have failed when its government loses the capacity to provide its citizens with the most basic services, namely security. Instructive examples of failed states within the past decade include Rwanda, the Congo, Somalia, Bosnia, and Afghanistan itself. In each of these cases, internal conflict brought effective state control to crash down and mired the populations in a morass of civil war, organized killing, famine, and massive refugee dislocation. The resulting anarchy presented an attractive environment for the Al-Qaida terrorist network, which sought refuge in the latter three countries. In 2001, the United States felt firsthand the consequences of Al-Qaida’s successful settlement in Afghanistan.

Despite the clear necessity of eradicating Afghanistan’s opium production capacity, there are several obstacles to a simple solution. First, the various warlords, arms dealers, and government officials whose livelihoods are couched in the heroin trade will offer stiff resistance if pressured to abandon such lucrative occupations.

Similarly, weaning rural Afghan opium cultivators from their crop is not a task that will be accomplished by persuasion. Opium production thrives in Afghanistan for the simple reason that it is the most profitable option available to Afghan farmers. A single hectare of opium provides an annual income of $4,600. By comparison, an equivalent area of land dedicated to wheat earns only $390 each year. In addition, opium needs less water than wheat and can be stored for several years without a significant decline in value. The options faced by many impoverished Afghan farmers is thus reduced to a choice between subsistence farming, and an income that provides security and moderate comfort. As long as they have a choice, many Afghan farmers will produce opium.

Afghan President Karzai has advocated the production of fruit and fine rugs as legal alternatives to opium cultivation. Afghan rugs, however, are increasingly manufactured by workers with mechanized looms in Pakistan. Meanwhile, inadequate irrigation and transportation infrastructure prohibits the cultivation of fruit and nut trees.

With options for alternative industries limited,
a seemingly obvious method for stemming the heroin outflow is to disrupt production and trafficking by force. Pakistan’s recent campaign to eradicate its own drug trade included the mobilization of soldiers and crop dusters to destroy opium fields. Needless to say, these measures harmed the land, the people, and the general citizenry’s faith in the government. Additionally, limited opium destruction temporarily inflates prices, which further increases the attractiveness of opium cultivation to impoverished farmers. Targeting Afghan opium growers for punishment threatens similar consequences.

Any strategy to limit Afghanistan’s opium production must address the structural problems that allow the drug economy to thrive. The institutionalization of good governance and the rule of law throughout Central Asia would make strides towards curtailing the corruption that presently allows drug traffickers to funnel heroin through the region unimpeded. A crackdown on corruption in these states should target the ranking civil and military officials who solicit vast sums of bribe money and perpetuate the drug trade.

A solution to Afghanistan’s drug trade must also involve a campaign to wipe out the structures that supports the heroin industry. After all, despite Western notions of Afghanistan’s “backwardness,” it is Western Europe’s heroin addicts who keep Afghanistan’s warlords in business and Hamid Karzai confined to Kabul. Western European states would do well to fund domestic education initiatives and treatment centers to prevent drug use and rehabilitate current users. Curtailing demand would slash drug profits, thus crippling Afghan warlords and forcing Afghan farmers to turn to other sources of income, all without the risk of losing guns and planes or hearts and minds.

Ultimately, the largest single impediment to political stability and economic development in Afghanistan is endemic poverty. The success of any attempt to establish a functioning state rests entirely on two of Afghanistan’s scarcest resources, money and security. With weak political institutions and no advanced industry, Afghanistan relies heavily on the munificence of international donors. Foremost among Afghanistan’s patrons is the United States, which has pledged $4 billion to fund security, reconstruction, and development projects since 2001. This pledge should be met to its full extent. The attacks of 2001 demonstrated that U.S. interests in Afghanistan exceed humanitarian concerns. Should the pressing problems of Afghanistan go unnoticed, it will be the United States and world community that pays the price of Afghanistan's drug trade.


Back to the Future in Nepal

-by Abbie ZAMCHECK

During Election Day in Iraq, a high turnout finally seemed to lift hopes for peace and democracy one step off the ground. Two days later in Nepal—a country with a knack for defying global trends—these prospects came crashing down.

On Tuesday, February 1, King Gyanendra of Nepal sacked the government. Under his authority, the prime minister and other party leaders under house arrest. Civil rights were suspended, and hundreds of political leaders, journalists and activists were imprisoned. Flights bound for Nepal were turned back midair. In an announcement that day on state run television, the king said that his new assumption of power was the best way to restore peace and democracy in Nepal. Most others called it a coup. And in the days that followed, Kathmandu, the country’s center of political and economic power, seemed as remote and isolated as the rural strongholds of the country’s Maoist insurgency.

Nepalese Maoists, when justifying their violent tactics, frequently cite Mao’s statement that “a revolution is not a dinner party.” Neither, apparently, is a royal coup. Following the declaration of a state of emergency, phone and internet connections were cut, silencing much communication to the outside world. Normal sources of news for Nepal simply disappeared. One of the more popular online sources of information from Nepal, nepalnews.com, was ripped from the web almost immediately following the action.

In one part of the country, students threw rocks at soldiers, who in turn shot at them. Most of Nepal, though, seems to have been under an efficient lockdown. The streets were silent except for passing army regiments. All demonstrations and public criticism of the king were banned for at least six months.

On February 8, phone and internet connections were restored. A new, state sanctioned version of nepalnews.com appeared that day, with this statement from its publisher: “We sincerely hope that the recent developments will lead to peace and security in the
country.” The website, in a new get-up, would operate within the sphere of the state of emergency declared in the country and in accordance with various directives issued by the government. We would like our readers to take note of this.” Media in Nepal appears to have a gun pointed at its temple, in a very literal sense. In the days after the king’s seizure of power, soldiers occupied newsrooms and broadcast stations, enforcing the ban on dissent. Since then they have left, but only after promising journalists that they should expect to be “disappeared for several hours” if they don’t self-censor.

This is the second time in three years that the king has dissolved the government. Never, though, in the four years of King Gyanendra’s rule, has his power been so absolute, and hopes for a democratic Nepal seemed so remote. The act is also viewed by many as a high stakes gamble by the king, who now is solely responsible for everything that happens in Nepal. If he doesn’t succeed, he may lose his throne. While Gyanendra is one of the most unpopular kings in Nepal’s history, however, many Nepalese are enthusiastic about his new powers. It is corrupt elected politicians who receive much of the blame for the eruption of the Maoist insurgency in 1996. More recently, some regard the stalled peace process as the fault of Prime Minister Deuba and the competing political parties. The sentiments of the pro-monarchists are reflected in the words of Ranjit Rauniyar, a writer for the Asian Wall Street Journal. He states:

What we have in Nepal today can be likened to a circus run amok, where all the clowns are putting on their own acts without any concern for the show as a whole. Now that the king has chosen to take over as circus master, the responsibility will rest on his shoulders to bring the performance together in what may be the last chance to save Nepal from complete ruin.

No longer burdened by political opposition, as the argument goes, Gyanendra’s military will have free reign to quash the nine-year-old Maoist insurgency. Many Nepalese are desperate for peace, and loathe the instability which they believe the rival political parties have only perpetuated. But there is no assurance that the king will succeed.

While there is much support for the king’s move, it’s important not to forget that this is the only opinion allowed now from Nepal’s newspapers and statesmen. Many view the king as the biggest clown in Nepal, whose preference for staging elaborate ceremony and sacrifices is severely out of place in a time of intense poverty and instability. The king is also criticized for deliberately weakening the power of Prime Minister Deuba and the rest of the government, and thus setting the stage for their failures. And many in Nepal long ago concluded that an absolute king is not the solution to their country’s problems. Nepal today is reminiscent of Nepal during the Panchayat period, which began in 1959 after King Mahendra seized power from the first democratically elected government in Nepal. Under the Panchayat system, dissent was also strongly curtailed, and political parties were banned. Only the country’s elite had political representation. This led to a severe neglect of the countryside that continues to this day. But now, the king’s latest act may not only further alienate much of Nepal’s citizenry—not including those already involved in armed uprising against the government—but also at least one of the country’s most powerful neighbors.

Nepal is geographically straddled between two giants—India and China. Subsequently, there is international influence on almost every dimension of Nepalese politics. This has been true from the start. Back in the 18th century, Prithvi Narayan Shah, the founder of Nepal and of Gyanendra’s dynasty, famously called his kingdom “a yam between two boulders,” and observed that Nepal’s survival rested on a balanced relationship with both powers. More recently, Nepal has courted its neighbors in opposing the Maoist insurgency. Both China and India have, for the most part, been eager to help Nepal quell the instability. But this latest chapter in Nepal’s history seems to have put Nepal more in China’s camp.

India has long been an influential supporter of democracy in Nepal. In 1950, the Nepalese Congress Party, founded in India, led massive protests in Kathmandu, which resulted in the abolition of the Rana court regime and the establishment of multi-party democracy in the country. Until recently, India provided a steady stream of military aid to Nepal. Indian officials often predicted their forces might have to intervene in
Nepal if the Maoists became too powerful, something that the rebels have long predicted in official statements. But the king’s recent seizure of power has been met by severe criticism from India. There has been no similar response from China.

Three days before the king seized power, Gyanendra made international headlines by shutting down the Dalai Lama’s offices in Kathmandu, a move widely regarded as a way to appease the Chinese government. Long a refuge for Tibetan dissidents to the Chinese occupation, Nepal and China’s relationship has improved in recent years. China, worried about instability on its borders as a result of the Maoist insurgency, has supported Nepal’s efforts to fight the rebels—China officially criticizes the rebels as false disciples of Mao. It seems like its support is paying off. In addition, Nepal’s army is also the recipient of millions of dollars in US aid. The Bush administration has usually explained its support for Nepal as part of the war on terror. After the king suspended the government three years ago, the US issued statements which urged Nepal to “solve its problems democratically.” Meanwhile, the military aid continued. The Royal Nepalese Army, true to its name, has always been under the control of Nepal’s monarchs. But now, it’s hard to ignore the true face of power in Nepal. Whether US policy towards Nepal will change remains to be seen.

Ultimately, however, the king’s performance in addressing Nepal’s pressing domestic issues will be the real test of Gyanendra grab for power. If he can stem Nepal’s corrupt government, promote economic growth, and successfully combat Maoist rebels, then it is possible that his dramatic seizure of governmental power could be justified by the Nepalese people. If not, his suppression of free press and civil rights may doom his monarchy to revolution and overthrow. Thus, only time will tell whether this is the start of a full restoration of the monarchy, or if it is instead Gyanendra’s last stand.

Abbie ZAMCHECK (’07) is a second year student at Brandeis University majoring in Politics and East Asian Studies.

New Words, Old Policy: Bush’s Second-Term Approach to Asia

- by Herschel HARTZ

The foreign policy analysts debated what a Bush reelection victory would mean for US policy toward Asian countries. The answer: more of the same, but in a different rhetoric than when President Bush first took the Presidency. Four years ago, Bush assumed leadership of a nation that was at relative peace with the world, without acts of international terrorism on its own soil and an election that had deeply divided the nation. The President spoke humbly about the world, declaring a tendency to avoid becoming entangled with other countries’ affairs.

Now, in a post-September 11th world, the President spoke boldly about democracy in his first two major addresses since assuming the Presidency for a second term. In his second Inaugural Address, President Bush spoke of an overtly idealistic approach to foreign policy that was based on spreading democracy and liberty around the globe. But even with the bold words, the Address changed nothing when it came to America’s policy toward Asia. The Address never mentioned a single country or continent, let alone the current crises in Asia. It mentioned nothing about the nuclear crisis in North Korea, nor did it speak to the constantly burgeoning trade deficit between the United States and China, which has been raising much interest from both the Left and the Right. The tsunami relief effort was not mentioned, either.

In many Inaugural Addresses, Presidents-elect speak to the core values of America and its foreign policies around the world. In his Address, the President reiterated an American foreign policy that had, for decades, been trying to make the world safe for democracy. How would this apply to Asia, especially when so many leaders before President Bush had spoken about democracy in similarly flattering terms?

From his speech, many of the President’s more active critics pulled out one of the more general statements as an indication that the President would be engaging the United States in more military conflicts down the road. Some Democrats asked whether the President would invade North Korea or seek a more aggressive line with the communists in China. The quotation that created such an uproar was a line that insinuated a new aggressive US role to achieve the end of dictatorships through whatever means possible: “It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”

However, the next line of the speech served to prove his critics wrong, establishing that the attempts to bring democracy to Asia were merely words and thereby not constituting real and significant action. Bush said, “This is not primarily the task of arms, though we will defend ourselves and our friends by force of arms when necessary. Freedom, by its nature, must be chosen, and defended by citizens, and sustained by the rule of law and the protection of minorities.”
What, then, did the Bush Inaugural Address have to say concerning China and North Korea? Throughout the decades, America has always spoken harshly about Chinese human rights violations or North Korean dictatorship, but this has certainly never impeded larger American concerns of a stable relationship with an Asian power like China or national security concerns with North Korea’s nuclear program.

Will the President’s repudiation of past American policy, which supported dictators as the lesser of two evils, prove to be a new aggressive approach to Asia to rid it of tyranny? Probably not, because, in the end, the President has to contend with larger forces, beyond his control, including a nuclear program in North Korea that threatens American security. More likely, American security will always take precedence over any support of democratic movements. As lofty as they sound, if democratic movements do not bring security to America, they are not needed. The large problem with the President’s speech is not with its goal. Few can disagree with the goal of spreading freedom. But how can the President seek to aggressively seek democracy when it conflicts with his administration’s attempts to keep China in check from becoming a larger and growing threat? How can the President seek to promote the development of those Southeast Asian countries when his country is overstretched elsewhere in the world? From the perspective of the Bush administration, disengagement is not the solution. But because American presence is stretched so thin, words must take its place.

President Bush’s Inaugural Address talked about so much but specified absolutely nothing. The analysts could not be surprised by a country that, for years, spoke in high platitudes about Asia but did little to stop human rights abuses. Rhetoric may inspire noble ideals, but it hardly translates to policy.

Just days later, the President surprised few onlookers of US-Asian relations when he put forward a State of the Union address that made no mention of China and only made one short and overlooked reference to North Korea. Normally, a State of the Union Address is a perfect opportunity to specify broad policy approaches. From the State of the Union, foreign policy analysts were struck with how the President failed to match his ideals with definitive policy proposals.

It now seems that saying little, or nothing at all, is the Bush administration’s policy. After four years in which the President traded words with the North Korean regime and raised eyebrows with his declaration that his administration would defend Taiwan by any means necessary, easing tensions is now the new policy. Few public pronouncements are ever made about the nuclear standoff in the Pacific. It seems that the hands-off approach will now take precedence over the former policy of a hands-on approach during the President’s first four years.

President Bush’s Inaugural Address might have given some the impression that American policy in Asia would change. He had no intention of reversing American policy; instead, his goal was to embody years of American policy that had preceded him. One should not expect the marching of freedom into Beijing, where free elections are non-existent, and it would be hard to foresee any military invasion of Pyongyang any time soon. From the President’s perspective, rhetoric serves the purpose. The question for the rest of us is how rhetoric will translate into any difference in US-Asian policy.

Herschel HARTZ is a second year student at Brandeis University majoring in Politics and History and minoring in African and Afro-American Studies.
Outsourcing (Part I)

About the Author

Lilian Duval is a technical writer, a 9/11 survivor, and a former software developer. She lives with her husband George, native of Singapore, in Ridgewood, New Jersey, and writes fiction in her spare time.

Synopsis: Outsourcing (Fiction)

Vijay, an outstanding young Indian economist, is hired by a New York company on Wall Street. Research assistant Aurelie fears his threat to her career. She is nevertheless drawn to him and amazed by his culture. Their interaction is an unpredictable mixture of business, pleasure, and tradition.

The new guy at work, Vijay, had come from India by way of London. Aurelie wasn’t pleased to be sharing her double office with someone who was on the phone all the time. Vijay must have dozens of friends. “What’s that language you’re speaking?” she asked between phone calls.

“Which one?” He swiveled his chair around to face her. He had an engaging smile and used it often. Their square office contained two desks, two chairs, some mismatched cabinets and bookshelves, and a seven-foot fiddle-leaf fig tree. Aurelie’s desk looked out on the New York Stock Exchange, and Vijay’s faced the rest of the company’s offices. They worked with their backs turned to each other.

“That was more than one language?” she said. They all sounded the same to her. Indian languages made her hungry because of their connotation with spicy food, and they also sounded sexy; it must have something to do with that Kama Sutra.

Vijay shook his head no, but evidently meant yes. “Hindi is one of our national languages, besides English.” His English was fluent and flawless. “I also speak Marathi with some people; that’s my mother tongue.” He swept his thick, black hair off his forehead and swiveled back to his work and his phone. Some sort of pleasant, perfumy aftershave swirled around the room. Aurelie could smell it from her desk.

An hour later, Vijay asked her about the Forecasting project. “I could benefit from your insight. You’re the expert.” His huge black eyes penetrated.

She was swallowed up by his look, at once exciting and disturbing. His eyes were smiling, while his other features were serious. “Not really,” she said, “I’m just on the sidelines. I’m a research assistant – you economists have the formulas and the insight.” Actually, Aurelie had been aiming for promotion to Junior Economist, though at age thirty-three it seemed undignified to be labelled junior anything.

“Nah, this is a team effort. According to Kurt, you’re the one with the mastery.” He pronounced “mastery” in the British way.

Aurelie’s mood switched. It wasn’t so much the praise; it was the way he delivered his pronouncements, as if her excellence were the irrefutable truth. She sat up straighter and gave him a half smile. Vijay got his notebook and began shooting precise technical questions. As he wrote, he said things like “Absolutely, terrific,” and “Of course, excellent, well done.” He filled several pages in half an hour.
“I guess you’ll be guiding this ship from now on,” she said, impressed. He’d issued no orders, yet seemed to have taken charge, though he was officially her equal in the corporate hierarchy. For now.

“I’m only an apprentice, here to learn.” He put down his notebook, stretched, and smiled. “What’s to eat around here?”

They went out into the mild December afternoon. The Manhattan streets were dry and windless, and the comfortable temperature didn’t match the seasonal decorations. Aurelie gave Vijay a walking tour of restaurants near Wall Street. They stopped at an Indian hole-in-the-wall where you had to be aggressive to grab a table during the lunch rush. “You’ve got to be carnivorous to get a seat here,” she told him.

“Ha – a place full of carnivorous vegetarians,” he said.

She laughed and handed him ten dollars. “Just get me what you’re having.” She lunged for a free table. Vijay emerged from the long line with a tray of rice, bread, and curry. He counted out her change, coins first, bills second, while several seatless customers hovered nearby, salivating for an opening. “Reminds you of home?” Aurelie asked over her curry.

“Close, not exactly.” Vijay was efficiently scooping his **palak paneer** with torn strips of **naan**, fashioning each piece into a spill-proof utensil, which he then devoured along with the curry. He seemed to be saving his rice for the **malai kofta**. Aurelie tried the bread-scooping method and had to keep licking spinach puree off her fingers, so she cheated with her fork. Vijay ate neatly without dripping any sauce.

At this rate of rapid eating, they would finish lunch in silence. “Do you like this country?” she asked.

“Well, let me say that I disagree with American interpretations of family, friendship, and morality,” he said, as if he’d prepared his answer beforehand. “I never heard the term ‘family reunion’ until I came here. In India, we don’t reunite; we just stay together. On friendship: in my culture, a friend is like a family member. We’re devoted to our friends.” He looked up from his nearly empty plate and said in a lower voice, “As for morality, I’m appalled by the American practice of casual sex.”

“Not everyone is the same here,” she said, slightly miffed, but feeling oddly compelled to win his approval. More customers were waiting for tables, pacing around with trays and leaping at the first vacancy. She and Vijay finished and got up to leave. “You’ll find that we have tremendous diversity here,” Aurelie said.
“Perhaps,” Vijay said. “Thanks for showing me around.”

Aurelie was going over Vijay’s speech for the conference uptown. “Your debut at headquarters,” she said. “Almost done – thirty pages.”

“Let’s see.” Vijay re-read his report rapidly, making several minor changes. The paper was titled “Funding World Hunger Without Adversely Affecting the Free Market,” and it included technical and mathematical analyses, with examples from classical economic models. Vijay had been given one week to complete his first assignment. That was yesterday. Aurelie had never seen such a complex thesis, fastidiously and entertainingly written, by such a young financial analyst. Maybe he was a genius. He had a B.E. from that famous I.I.T., and then his Master’s from the London School of Economics. Vijay pronounced the speech fit for the conference. He stuck it in his desk drawer and went on to his next task, while sitting on one foot and humming softly.

A week later, they were sitting around an oversized oval mahogany table in the boardroom on the sixtieth floor at the company’s uptown headquarters, admiring the panorama of Central Park. Vijay was about to be introduced, and he was shuffling through books and rumpled papers in his attaché case. “Aurelie, do you have a copy of my speech?” he whispered.

“No, did you forget it? Oh, my God—”

“Don’t worry.” He was calm. “I remember enough of it.” He strode to the front of the room and greeted the board members and chief officers. His black hair and charcoal suit stood out against the wall-to-wall white board. He was only around five-nine, but looked tall up there. Aurelie dreaded watching him explain his first major error – forgetting the document – but he sprang into the speech, starting with the introduction, and spoke as if he were reading from an active Teleprompter. From beginning to end, stopping to illustrate concepts by drawing charts with colored markers on the white board, he delivered the speech exactly as Aurelie remembered it from the week before. He spoke in well-modulated tones, catching the eye of one corporate bigshot after another, and occasionally sending a nearly imperceptible, conspiratorial look in Aurelie’s direction, as if this were an immensely delicious shared secret. Nervousness was not part of his repertoire, and he put his audience at ease. It took nearly an hour to cover all the subtopics, and everyone applauded spontaneously at the end.

Questions and answers followed. Mesmerized by his performance, his audience hadn’t noticed the extemporaneous delivery. Aurelie considered how best to announce that. “I have a question, Vijay.”

“Yes?” His lips curled in a slight smile.

“How did you manage to present all that technical material without any notes?” she asked. All the board members and corporate officers gasped in unison. The ones in front gaped at the empty lectern.

“I find it easier to communicate without papers to distract me. No big deal,” Vijay said. His eyes were shining.

Aurelie started looking forward to going to work in the morning; and on weekends, she even looked forward to Monday, which would have been unthinkable a month ago. New Year’s Eve was anticlimactic. She and her boyfriend Ben went out to dinner with a couple of his goofy friends, and that was it for their celebration.

“Happy New Year,” Vijay said on the first work day back.

“You too. What did you do?”

“Oh, it was great. Three friends flew in from India, and a few more came from out of state, plus all the ones who live near me. Best party we ever had,” he said. “And you?”

“We went to a party at a friend’s house. It was a lot of fun.” She felt foolish for lying about something trivial.
What difference should it make what he thinks, she asked herself. “How can you have so many friends in this country after only a month?”

“They’re all from India, too. We keep in touch – college friends, work friends. We never say goodbye – we just say, ‘See you later.’”

Aurelie wondered if she would have enjoyed such an endless parade of friends. She was intent on her task when Vijay leaned over her desk, fiddling with his passport. “I thought I’d touch base with you.” He looked her right in the eye.

She inhaled his scent and giggled. He had an endearing way of imitating American speech mannerisms and corporate jargon. She turned sideways and looked up at him in a flirtatious manner without thinking.

“They’re sending three people to London for a four-day conference,” he said, twisting the multicolored plastic sculpture on her desk into a new shape, then balancing his passport on top of it.

“Who’s going?” She twirled the silk scarf on her neck.

“Oh, Kurt’s going, and so am I.” He stopped twiddling with the sculpture and grinned.

“And who else?” She hid her hot cheeks behind her hair.

“You. First Monday in February.” He snatched his passport off the sculpture and flipped it onto his desk.

She teased, “That’s a problem. There’s a fifty-fifty chance the airports will be snowed in with blizzards.”

“Get out of here,” he said, in his cultivated, British-inflected Indian accent.

She laughed at his hilarious experiment with American slang. “Hey, are you trying to be so cool or something? ‘Git outta here,’” she mimicked. “It really doesn’t snow that much in New York.”

He sat on the end of her desk and told her about monsoon season in India. “Once, when I was coming home from college with a friend, it had been raining for four days straight. We thought we could make it all the way home, but we had to get out of the car and push it. The mud was up to here,” he said, indicating his knees.

“Wow. Were you wearing boots?”

“Sneakers. The mud was so thick, every step we took we almost lost our shoes. We finally plowed the car to the edge of the road and waded to the village to look for something to eat.”

“How’d you ever get home?”

“We waited a few hours for the road to dry out, then we chugged our way out of there. You know what, though. It was so much fun. I carry happy memories about that,” he said, gazing out the window at a scene from his past.

Kurt walked in and Vijay slid off her desk. “Happy New Year,” Aurelie said, annoyed.

“Happy New Year yourself,” Kurt said, and massaged her shoulder a little. Aurelie shrank from his touch. Kurt’s stomach hung out over his belt more than it had before the holidays, and he had raked his colorless hair over his bald spot. Both men left the room and Aurelie pondered the trip to London. The prospect of spending four days away with Vijay was enticing.

She sneaked a look at his passport. There was his date of birth. She did a quick calculation. He was twenty-four
years old. It was impossible. She checked again. His picture smiled up at her. He looked and acted so much older. He comported himself like a mature adult at the zenith of his career. Twenty-four, she told herself. Flirting was fun, and she was going to stop right now, and that was the end of that. She applied herself to her work.

Vijay was on the phone again when she grabbed her coat and purse. “Wait a minute, Aurelie.” He finished his conversation and hung up. “Where are you going for lunch?”

Well, a lunch companion was all right, she rationalized. “Oh, to the Chinese place to bring something back. I’ve got so much to do.”

“Good idea.” He jumped into his trench coat.

She trotted briskly alongside him, reluctant to ask him to slow down. Maybe he wasn’t accustomed to escorting women. “Have you noticed Kurt’s expanding vocabulary?” she asked. “He focuses on a few designer words, and sticks them into whatever he’s saying. Then he looks around to see if anyone’s impressed.”

“Yeah. He’s latched onto ‘egregious’,” he said. “And another one I’ve observed. Guess.”

“Ah, give me a hint,” she said, surprised he would indulge in gossip about their boss. They jaywalked across Broadway.

“It means ‘to make things worse.’”

“Exacerbate,” she said, out of breath.

“Yes. And one more big one.” They were racewalking down the block. “The last two syllables mean ‘idiot.’”

“Dummy… dodo… stupid… moron,” she said.

“Oxymoron!” they shouted together, and slapped hands. They stepped into the takeout place.

“My treat today,” Vijay said. “You pay next time.”

They settled down in the office with their oil-stained brown bags. “What do you like to read?” Aurelie asked.

“Let’s see – Salman Rushdie and a lot of other Indian authors,” he said. “Technical journals, the classics – especially Shakespeare, the plays. Good for when you need a quote. And physics, black holes, astronomy –”

“Astronomy, not astrology, huh?” she said.

“Astronomy is very big in India, a serious subject. I can read your palm,” he said. “Come here and I’ll give you an expert reading, free of charge.”

She put down her white container of rice. He traced the longest line in her palm. “You have a bright future that you cannot see now.” He traced another line. “You’ll make a decision at a fork in the road.” He traced a third line all the way up her wrist and held her hand for a moment.

“Ooh, you’re tickling me.” She was relishing the touch of his hand and the smell of his cologne.

“You will have an adventure.” He let go.

“Vijay, I’m not sure about your astrological credentials.”

“Well, I was bluffing. But my Mom is proficient at palm reading and Tarot cards. Maybe her skill rubbed off on
me.”

With his back turned, she sniffed her hand, which retained the ghost of his aftershave. She wondered how old his Mom was.

“Hey, I thought of a great Scrabble word you’ll never know in a million years,” she offered. “Eight letters, starts with ‘p,’ a disease of wasting away.”

“You lose. The word is ‘phthisis,’” he said. “And I thought you had an ace up your sleeve.”

“How on earth did you know that?”

“Simple,” he said, feigning an aristocratic pose, “I was born superior.”

He sat beside her at the conference table for their weekly status meeting. Kurt was expounding on some project to the nine members of his captive audience, while Vijay was sketching a recognizable caricature of Kurt. Aurelie was restraining the urge to break into raucous laughter. She felt Vijay’s foot against hers and moved. Under the table, his knee shifted and deliberately rested against her leg. From the sides of her eyes, his face revealed nothing. She hunched her shoulders and closed her eyes just for a minute to savor the sensation.

Things were accelerating slightly. One day, after an especially satisfying conversation, Vijay said, “You know, Aurelie, I’ve never before met a woman who could discuss so many subjects so intelligently.”

She felt deeply honored. Glancing at the door to be sure that no one was watching through the glass, she blurted, “If I were your age, I’d dye my hair and skin to match yours, and pursue you to the ends of the earth.” It was out of her mouth, and she couldn’t believe she had said it.

“Well, you can’t step into a time machine,” he said, but he was grinning.

“I feel like I’m in one now,” she said, “because every day around here is ten minutes long.”

“Outsourcing” will be continued in the next issue of Monsoon.
Photographs by Wayne Mak

Wayne MAK is a third year student at Brandeis University majoring in Neuroscience.
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Acknowledgements

President Jehuda Reinharz
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Dean Elaine Wong and the Brandeis Pluralism Alliance
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