Asian Values in Human Rights Education: A Southeast Asian Case Study

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Abstract. This paper explores the critical role of human rights education in fostering a deep understanding and appreciation of human rights values within social life. Despite the historical roots of human rights predating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, many aspects, such as freedom of speech and equality before the law, remain inconsistently applied in society. The principle of universality, which posits that human rights apply to everyone regardless of status, race, nationality, language, or religion, faces significant challenges in its acceptance, particularly in Southeast Asia. Here, the concept of 'Asian Values,' characterized by consensus, communitarianism, social order, and a paternalistic state, often conflicts with what is perceived as 'Western Values' of transparency, accountability, and individualism. This paper examines the intersection of these Asian Values with human rights education in Southeast Asia, highlighting the ongoing debate and investigating how these values influence the implementation and acceptance of human rights education in the region.

Keywords: Human rights education, Asian Values, human rights

1   Introduction

The importance of human rights education is not merely to teach students to understand the nature of human rights but also to develop a sense of human rights value in social life. Despite the history of human rights happening long before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) 1948 was established, to some extent, the human rights value is not fully applicable in society—for instance, the freedom of speech and equality before the law. Historically, the notion of human rights has been in society, from the Islam holy book or Qur'an, the Magna Carta 1915, the English Rights of Bill, to many other treaties throughout the years. Human rights are widely acknowledged and have become a norm [1]as well as customary law since the establishment of 1948 when 9 treaties of human rights were established; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant

Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED).

In human rights nature, one particular principle carried out with the covenants is universality which translates to the rights that equally apply to everyone regardless the status, race, nationality, language, and religion[2]. A major issue in human rights application is that the universality is not accepted widely[3] including in Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, Southeast Asia countries uphold the Asian Values which many scholars believe that the Asian Values hindered the application of human rights. Asian values are characterized by a focus on consensus, communitarianism instead of individualism, the promotion of social order and harmony, reverence for elders, discipline, a paternalistic State, and the central role of government in economic development[4]. The contradiction of the Asian Values often associated with human rights is a 'Western Values' which for Boll(2001, 45 - 58) refers to values associated with transparency, accountability, global competitiveness, a universalistic outlook and universal practices, and an emphasis on private initiatives and the independence of the private sector.

Human rights education is essential in the formal and informal education setting[5] so that students and individuals comprehend human rights, respect them, and adopt responsibility for defending, promoting, and preserving them.

The endless debate of Asian Values in human rights and education created the notion that all values in human rights can be implemented in Asian countries, including in the Southeast Asia region.   Acknowledging this issue, this paper examines the correlation of Asian Values in the application of Human Rights Education by taking Southeast Asian countries as the study case.

1.1   Exploring Asian Values in Southeast Asia

Asian Values refer to moral, social, and cultural principles that are considered unique to Asia, especially East and Southeast Asia. This concept emphasizes the importance of social harmony, collectivism, respect for authority, and the important role of the family. Asian Values are often contrasted with more individualistic and liberal Western values and have been popularized by several leaders and academics in Asia to highlight cultural differences and emphasize the uniqueness and strengths of Asian communities in facing global challenges. According to Indian philosopher Amartya Sen, values such as democracy and freedom also have strong roots in Asia [6]. This certainly contradicts the assumption that mature democracy is only owned by Western countries. Asia has a pattern that triggers the immunity of Asian countries in facing various global challenges.

Despite varying interpretations, Asian values are rooted in communitarian values, authoritative government, and harmony in society in contrast to other individual freedoms and values in Western societies (Kim, 2011; & Thompson, 2001). In its application in Southeast Asia, its presence is still present in community interactions and government policies, including various cyber domain regulations and the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 (Juned, 2023). Referring to the opinions of influential figures in

Southeast Asia, Asian Values are an important instrument in the development of a country and region.

The former president of Singapore, Lee Kwan Yeuw expressed in the book entitled "*From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000*" [7], regarding the importance of values such as hard work, discipline, social responsibility, and respect for authority and family in creating social stability and economic progress [8]. Meanwhile, Mahathir Muhammad, former Prime Minister of Malaysia, also explained the concept of Asian Values in his book "The Malay Dilemma" (1970), which shows the urgency of values such as harmony, collectivism, and respect for tradition and authority as an important pillar in national development from the two former leaders of two countries in Southeast Asia, reinforces what Samuel Huntington said in "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order", where Asian values emphasize the group above the individual. , the importance of family, hierarchical authority, and strong communities, in contrast to more individualistic Western values[9]. According to Bauer and Bell (1999), Asians are a collective in which society is set up with communitarian values where the society's interface takes priority over that of the individual person[10]. In any case, not pioneers said the same, as Asian Values, at the time, just served as an apparatus for dictator pioneers to protect themselves from Westernized philosophies which are moreover known as liberal critics (Noorjavi, 2021; & Hoon, 2004).

The following Asian Values are the basic characteristics of society in the Southeast Asia region;

- **Social Harmony and Collectivism**
  In many Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia and Thailand, social harmony is highly valued. *The "gotong royong"* concept in Indonesia reflects cooperation and collectivism in society, where people work together to achieve a common goal. Thailand also prioritizes balance and harmony in daily social interactions. These values help maintain social stability and encourage community cooperation.

- **Respect for Authority**
  Countries such as Malaysia and Singapore show great respect for authority and hierarchy. A strong government structure and citizens' compliance with laws and regulations are characteristics that reflect Asian values in the region. Singapore, in particular, is known for the strict rules enforced by its government as well as citizens' compliance with those rules, which are considered essential for creating an orderly and stable social order.

- **The Importance of Family**
  Throughout Southeast Asia, the family is considered a very important basic unit of society. In the Philippines, for example, the nuclear and extended families have a central role in social life and daily decisions. Children are expected to care for their aging parents, and strong family ties are a key foundation in building a cohesive and supportive society.

- **Social Responsibility and Hard Work**

  The values of hard work and discipline are highly valued in Southeast Asian countries. Countries like Vietnam demonstrate a strong commitment to social responsibility and community solidarity. Hard work and individual contribution to the well-being of the community are seen as a moral obligation. These values drive economic progress and sustainable social development.

- **Religiosity and Religious Values**
  Many Southeast Asian countries have large religious populations, and religious values play an important role in daily life. In Thailand, Buddhism influences many aspects of social and cultural life. Religious principles often guide individual actions and decisions, creating a society based on strong moral and spiritual values.

- **Cultural Diversity and Tolerance**
  Southeast Asia is known for its rich diversity, and tolerance for cultural differences is a highly valued value. Indonesia, with its motto "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*" (Diverse but still one), emphasizes the importance of living side by side in harmony despite differences in ethnicity, religion, and language. This value encourages harmony and diversity in everyday life.

In summary, Southeast Asia grapples with the concept of "Asian Values" that emphasizes social harmony, collectivism, and respect for authority. While these values contribute to social stability and economic progress, they can also create tension with individual freedoms and human rights. Human rights education plays a crucial role in navigating this complexity. By exploring the interpretations of Asian Values and their application in the region, students can develop critical thinking skills. Examining case studies and engaging in discussions can help them understand how these values might be used to justify limitations on freedom of expression or dissent. Ultimately, a nuanced approach is needed. Recognizing the importance of Asian Values while fostering a strong foundation in human rights principles can pave the way for a future where both can coexist. This future requires empowering future generations to understand and advocate for human rights in a way that respects their cultural heritage.

1.2 The Universal Principles of Human Rights

The foundational tenet of human rights asserts that essential human rights are inherent to every individual, irrespective of their citizenship, sex, ethnicity, faith, or any other categorization. This tenet, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) established by the United Nations in 1948, confirms that these rights are unconditional and should be universally protected. The UDHR serves as a global benchmark for human rights, aiming to ensure dignity, freedom, and impartiality for all individuals [11].

The principle of universality is a key component of international human rights law, indicating that human rights are comprehensive and indivisible, signifying that they are

equally applicable to all individuals worldwide without discrimination. This principle is supported by various international agreements and treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which elaborate on and require nations to uphold these rights (Donnelly, 2013). Universality does not undermine the significance of cultural diversity; instead, it necessitates a balance that recognizes local practices while safeguarding fundamental human rights [12].

2   Methodology

This paper utilized qualitative research methodology to conduct a literature review on Asian Values and the universal principles of human rights. It also incorporated the viewpoints of different researchers regarding implementing human rights education in Southeast Asia. This analysis will explore the extent to which Asian ideals conflict with human rights ideals, taking into account contemporary discussions. Additionally, it will consider scholars' viewpoints on the issues of human rights education.

3   Findings and Discussions

Southeast Asia presents a complex setting for the promotion of human rights, influenced by a variety of political, cultural, and social factors. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has made efforts to promote human rights by adopting the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD) in 2012. While the AHRD reaffirms the universality of human rights, it also introduces the notions of regional particularities and cultural relativism, reflecting the diverse contexts of the region[13]. However, the effectiveness of such regional mechanisms is often limited by varying levels of commitment and political will among member states.

In human rights education, the core of human rights must be understood thoroughly. To some extent, Asian values have hindered the practice of human rights education. Social harmony and collectivism hindered the freedom of expression, especially to silence the minority voices. Similarly, the respect for authority notion hindered questioning and holding leaders accountable. This could weaken checks and balances in government. The importance of family could lead to overlooking human rights abuses within families, like domestic violence or child marriage. The social responsibility and hard work notion is contradicts human rights values because it tends to justify the prioritization of economic development over environmental protection. Meanwhile, the oppressed side of economic development has been marginalized. Moreover, despite Religion can play a positive role in society, some interpretations can infringe on individual rights, especially regarding freedom of religion or belief, LGBTQ+ rights, or women's rights. Cultural diversity and tolerance often do not overlook the minority and marginalized group.

Countries like Indonesia and the Philippines have achieved significant advancements in promoting human rights. Indonesia, the most populous Muslim-majority country globally, has seen notable improvements in civil liberties and democratic governance since the end of the Suharto regime in 1998. The Philippines, with its active civil society, has a strong tradition of human rights advocacy, although it faces persistent challenges such as extrajudicial killings and political repression[14].

Despite these efforts, Southeast Asia grapples with persistent human rights challenges. Authoritarian regimes in countries like Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam have been accused of systematic human rights violations, including restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and the press. Myanmar has faced international condemnation for its treatment of the Rohingya minority, described as ethnic cleansing by the United Nations[15].

In addition to political repression, issues such as human trafficking, exploitation of migrant workers, and inadequate legal protections for marginalized communities persist across the region. Human rights organizations frequently document the harsh conditions faced by migrant workers, particularly in industries like construction, fishing, and domestic work. Many of these workers endure poor living conditions, unpaid wages, and abuse, highlighting the need for stronger enforcement of labour rights[16].

The notion of universal human rights, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948, posits that these entitlements are inherent to every individual, irrespective of their background (United Nations, 1948). Nevertheless, the realization of these rights on a global scale presents a multifaceted challenge, notably in Southeast Asia, where they often come into conflict with deeply ingrained cultural and political frameworks collectively referred to as "Asian values." These values prioritize community solidarity over individualism, social coherence over personal liberties, and deference to authority, thereby complicating endeavours to safeguard universal human rights, particularly within the realms of education and politics.

3.1   Educational Challenges

Education stands as a fundamental human entitlement crucial for the enjoyment of other rights. The UDHR underscores the right to education for all individuals, aimed at fostering the complete development of the human persona (United Nations, 1948). Nonetheless, in Southeast Asia, the realization of this entitlement is frequently impeded by the confluence of Asian values and socio-economic circumstances.

In countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, educational access is curtailed by poverty, insufficient infrastructure, and political instability. In Cambodia, for example, economic constraints compel numerous children to engage in labour, leading to elevated rates of school abandonment and constraining their prospects[17]. The prioritization of economic productivity over personal educational growth reflects a broader societal emphasis on communal endurance over individual progress.

In addition, in Myanmar, the education of human rights lacks proper training to understand the core of human rights. The although the country has adopted a new curriculum of moral and civil education, life skills and social studies teachers in the primary level are unable to understand the concept of human rights included in the lesson[18].

Hence many teachers in Myanmar used participatory activities to exercise one of the human rights; freedom of expression. In short, students learn HRE by practice rather than theory.

Moreover, gender inequities in education endure throughout the region. Conventional gender roles and economic imperatives frequently deter girls from attending school. In certain rural areas, educating girls is viewed as less crucial than preparing them for early matrimony and household duties. Initiatives to bridge this disparity encompass the construction of additional schools in remote regions and the provision of scholarships for girls; however, deeply entrenched cultural norms persist in obstructing advancement [19].

3.2   Political Challenges

The challenges encountered in the political domain within Southeast Asia are conspicuous due to the varying degrees of authoritarianism witnessed in nations like Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam, which frequently face censure for their human rights practices. The conflict between the universal principle of human rights and the political landscape in these countries, where strict governance is justified using Asian values, poses a significant concern.

In Myanmar, the military administration has consistently suppressed political dissent, arguing that such measures are indispensable for upholding national cohesion and stability. The plight of the Rohingya community serves as an example of how emphasizing national identity and social order over individual rights can lead to severe human rights violations (UNHCR, 2017). The government's actions, deemed necessary for national security and unity, directly contradict universal human rights principles.

Likewise, in Vietnam, the government exerts tight control over freedom of expression and assembly, citing the necessity of preserving social concord and averting chaos. Critics contend that these regulations stifle political pluralism and personal freedoms, essential components of universal human rights (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The utilization of Asian values in this context consolidates governmental authority and constrains democratic participation.

The political challenge is also associated with the internalization of human rights practice. In some practices, the human rights understanding stumbled against the political dynamics that take away rights such as the freedom of expression. Although Article 19 of UDHR 1948 and Article 19 of the International Covenants of Civil and Political Rights guarantee the freedom of speech, in practice, the law within countries in Southeast Asia limits the rights.

In Brunei, Laws of Brunei Chapter 24 Article 3(a) prohibits people within Brunei to express hatred or contempt or exciting disaffection against His Majesty the Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan or the Government; in Cambodia, the Law on Telecommunications 2015 allows the government to monitor the communication, in Indonesia, the Electronic Information and Transaction Law often used to threatening people who criticize the government, in Laos, the 2015 Law on Prevention and Combating Cyber Crime used to silence the information spread, especially the information that against the government. The law is rather dictating information spread within the country and

monitored by the government of Lao PDR. In Malaysia, the Sedition Act (1948, revised 1969) criminalizes speech that incites hatred against the government or the monarchy. In Myanmar, the Telecommunications Law includes provisions against defamation and misinformation and is used to monitor information. In the Philippines, individuals opposing the government are re-labeled to silence dissent. In Singapore, the Internal Security Act allows for detention without trial for actions deemed a threat to national security. In Thailand, criticism of the royal family is restricted under Section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code. In Vietnam, Cybersecurity Law No. 24/2018/QH14 restricts online content and imposes control over internet usage.

The human rights education to make people understand fully the core of human rights and its implementation is closely related to the political dynamic within the countries. Hence, political challenge becomes one of the prominent factors in the success of human rights education.

3.3   Balancing Universal Human Rights and Asian Values

Striking a balance between universal human rights and Asian values necessitates a nuanced approach that recognizes cultural particularities while advocating for fundamental rights. One strategy involves engaging local communities in dialogues on human rights, presenting these rights in a manner that resonates with their values and experiences. For instance, emphasizing the communal benefits of education and political participation can facilitate the integration of universal human rights with community-centric Asian values.

Collaboration between international organizations and local governance is paramount in fortifying institutions that uphold human rights while considering cultural intricacies. This entails enhancing educational systems to ensure equal opportunities for all children and supporting political reforms that enhance transparency and accountability without compromising societal cohesion.

4   Conclusion

The Asian emphasis on collectivism and respect for authority undeniably shapes how human rights are understood in Southeast Asia. While these values hold merit, human rights education has a critical role to play: ensuring a deep understanding of core human rights principles, especially freedom of expression, which often faces limitations in the region.

Human rights education can be a powerful tool for navigating this tension. By equipping students to critically analyze the concept of "Asian values" and their potential to restrict freedoms, it can foster a culture of questioning and challenging the status quo. Additionally, contextualizing human rights principles within a Southeast Asian framework makes them more relatable and empowers students to advocate for human rights in a way that aligns with their own societies. Given the specific challenges related to freedom of speech, human rights education should prioritize this right.

Techniques like role-playing and discussions can explore the importance of dissent and a free press in a healthy democracy. Investing in teacher training on human rights principles and pedagogy is also crucial. Empowered educators can create safe spaces for open discussion and critical thinking within classrooms. Ultimately, a robust and innovative approach to human rights education can empower future generations to understand and advocate for fundamental rights, even amidst cultural and political challenges. This paves the way for a future where both Asian values and universal human rights can coexist and flourish.

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