

The Future of Idealism. Does Post-materialism Have a Perspective in Korea?

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At an international conference on 24 May 2012 at Gyeongsang National University on “Social Change and Postmaterialism in Korea”, led by Korean sociologist Sootaek Kang, international experts, among them Taiwan’s World Values Survey director Lu-huei Chen and myself, discussed the future of idealism in Korea.

Idealism as put into the practice of modern societies has been

sometimes described as “post-materialism”: privileging social cohesion, pluralism, participation, self-expression, sustainability of the environment and of interpersonal relations, as well as quality of life over mere economic growth and social order. As experience has shown, such a “societal” idealism is strongest when times are good: when the economy is striving, people are freed from the needs of mere survival and thus have time to aspire to higher goals. Or in other words: When the belly is full, the desire of people starts to work on non-egoistic values for the greater good of society.

While for a long time in history the Western open societies of the USA and Europe were leading the globe with regard to the percentage of “post-materialists” in the composition of national populations given to their economic wellbeing and democratic, participatory structure, the past years have seen a shift from the West to the East. Given that the West is going through multiple economic and financial crises since 2007, that means for six consecutive years, with seemingly no end in sight, the numbers of social idealists have decreased dramatically. The crises have produced record unemployment, austerity politics and economic recession, and thus they have infused fear into Western societies; and as we know, fear is the greatest enemy of post-materialism.

In this situation, Asian democracies have taken over the lead in implementing idealistic values and fostering post-materialistic cohorts in their populations, and they have carried them on for the past years. Already since the mid of the 1990s, countries like Korea were among the world's leaders in social idealism and post-materialism. Among the origins of this Asian leadership are their collective mindset, their strongly cooperative traditional cultures and their non-competitive, non-messianic religious fundamentals. Another reason is the youth factor. While most Western societies are aging, Asian countries have much younger populations - and as it is an accepted standard in transcultural idealism research, the lifecycle plays an important role in determining the percentage of idealism, at least in developed countries. The more people get older in their lives, the more they usually become materialistic.

Among the Asian countries, Korea in particular has played a key role in the diffusion and practice of "post-materialistic" idealism over decades. As an effect of its unprecedented - and widely unparalleled - economic growth particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, Korea has become a highly idealistic modern society, with an outstanding level of collective commitment and a participatory social structure.

But today, despite its still positive economic performance,

Korean idealism seems to be widely on the retreat. As surveys carried out between 2005 and today show, the numbers of “post-materialists” in Korean society have halved or even cut into a third in the meantime - with negative outlook. At the same time, the materialists have drastically increased to be (at least statistically) the vast majority, while the „mixed“ part of the population has also expanded at the costs of the outspoken and active idealists. How is that possible? What happened?

The recent decline of social idealists in Korea has complex causes. *First*, the inequalities and rifts in Korean society are rapidly evolving. As has been shown by recent national and international statistics, Korea has the second biggest income and wealth gap between the rich and the poor of all OECD countries, much worse than even the U.S. Always fewer people own always larger proportions of the national wealth; and Korea’s relative poverty rate has risen to 18,3 percent. In addition, the government’s ability to balance income disparity through taxation and fiscal spending in 2011 was statistically one of the lowest of the developed world, to the surprise of many international observers.

Second, as a consequence there is a growing ideological polarization of Korean society which mirrors its deepening social split. This polarization leads to a less cooperative

overall mindset in general; but it also leads to a polarization within post-materialists themselves who are falling apart into a leftist, radical anti-government and “revolutionary” stripe on the one hand and into a conservative, neo-religious fraction on the other inclined rather to stability than to cooperation.

Third, the growing generation gap and the pressure to enter the working force as soon as possible due to increasing youth unemployment (currently at more than 20%) has produced a young Korean generation with less idealistic dedication and more pragmatically egoistic than its preceding ones.

Fourth, the threats from the Eurozone and the global economic crises is unconsciously perceived by Koreans, without that the nation has much options to influence the outcome. Although Korean economy is still doing comparatively well, the growing threats by the Western crises exerts psychological pressure that becomes an anticipative negative factor.

Fifth but certainly not least, the changing regional and geopolitical balances between democracies and rising authoritarian nations like China influence Korean idealism. The battle between democracies and non-democracies will be the great global battle of the 21st century. It is no future music anymore, but has already begun with a global focus in Asia, as

the new U.S. “Pacific first” strategy has clearly shown. In fact, China is doing everything to convince the rest of Asia, including Korea, that democracy may be a less effective form of government than “progressive” communism. China believes in elitist government regulation “from above”, not in grassroot idealism “from below”, i.e. not in the social creativity of a sovereign citizen. But the concept and successful practice of “post-materialism” is all about the conviction and activity of the empowered individual. In this sense, the rise of China is not in the interest of “post-materialistic” values and social idealism in Korea - on the contrary, it is in essence opposed to them, at least as long as China is no democracy.

So if all this is the case, and if such a complexly weaved non-favourable overall constellation is not going to change anytime soon: Where is the perspective? Does social idealism, does “post-materialism” still have a future in “post-boom” Korea?

As we found out at this weeks conference by comparing the most up-to-date data and analyses, the outlook is mixed. The situation is difficult, but not hopeless. It is not as difficult as in the current West, but it is less hopeful than it was still a couple of years ago. To summarize it in just a few short words, social idealism in Korea can be maintained if six main measures are undertaken.

First, save the middle class from decline.

Second, overcome the income and wealth distribution gap by appropriate measures not limited to single fields, but broadly conceived as government priority across departments and ressorts. Make it a multi-dimensional priority strategy for the coming legislative and governmental period starting end of 2012.

Third, fix youth unemployment.

Fourth, re-integrate the working class into the post-materialist group. Measures needed for that purpose are backing it up economically, and trying to empower it through helping it to find its own language and constructive public discourse.

Fifth, overcome ideological polarization between leftist and conservative post-materialists in Korea by trying to find common ground through joint projects and activity fields, for example through jointly addressing issues of sustainability or social stability measures.

Sixth, restore and intensify positive public debate about the benefits of democracy, as opposed to authoritarian regimes. As social research around the world shows, post-materialism or social idealism is directly related to, and dependent on the

organizational form of democracy; so Korea shouldn't let the Western crises damage domestic democracy by not keeping its benefits sufficiently publicly present.

It is clear that as always when ideas are put into reality, these six measures packages will not make any miracles; and they may not produce immediate results. But most certainly, they will effect the overall development on the medium term for the benefit of stability, balance and collective progress in Korean society, if implemented with conviction and sufficient stubbornness. Korea should do everything to keep its for a long time exemplary social idealism alive - for the sake of the destiny of democracy in Asia, as an example for the West and the world, and - most important - in its own domestic interest.



(May 24, 2012, commemorative photograph)