# East Asian Exceptionalism - Rejoinder

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East Asian Exceptionalism – Rejoinder

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Abstract

This short note calls for a more careful examination of value patterns in East Asia, focusing on the applicability for that region of the Self-expression Index constructed by Welzel (2005). We show that in East Asia, acceptance of homosexuality, a core component of the index, has a correlation with the other components, that is opposite to what we observe in the rest of the world. Further analysis indicates that conservative attitudes towards homosexuality in East Asia have no negative influence on undermining people’s aspirations for democracy. Such an anomaly provides strong empirical evidence that the Self-expression Index has limited cross-cultural validity.
In the rich West, but also in Latin America, responses from the World Values Survey (WVS) show that people who are more religious and less tolerant of homosexuality than the average in their country tend to be less trusting and less keen on democracy. Inglehart and Welzel have used these correlations as one of the building blocks for their index of self-expression values. Combining this index with another index for traditional-rational values, they were able to draw a very nice cultural map of the world where poor and less-developed countries are in the South-West corner and rich, tolerant and fully democratic nations occupy the North-East quadrant with the best scores on both indices.

Our Comment in this issue of the JCCP addressed an anomaly in the cultural map: the location of the East Asian countries with a very high score on the traditional-rational index but below-average scores on the self-expression index. We explained the exception for East Asia by showing that Japan, Korea, Taiwan and the other countries in the region exhibit a pattern in their values that differs from the average for the rest of the world: East Asian citizens who are above average in their keenness on democracy and in their positive answers on the trust question in the WVS are also more traditional in their dislike of homosexuality. Because the patterns are very strong, we cautioned against applying the Inglehart-Welzel index of self-expression — where the question about homosexuality is an important component — in analyses of the prospect for democracy in East Asia. That might suggest that these countries are not yet ready to deepen their experience of democracy, because the level of social tolerance is lower than in comparable Western countries.

In his table 1 Welzel now shows weak positive correlations between the variables in the WVS that measure tolerance and three other clusters of responses in the Surveys, related to questions about female emancipation, freedom of speech, and imagination and independence as preferred goals of bringing up children. Precisely because his correlations are so weak, he leaves open the possibility that in the East Asian region female emancipation, free speech and tolerant parenting do go together with a stronger democratic culture, without explicitly negating our finding that little tolerance for homosexuals does not appear to be a problem for gaining or deepening democracy.

Our paper focussed on the East Asia region, but here are two pieces of evidence bearing explicitly on the contrast between East Asia (including Japan) and all other countries, using the 2005-6 Wave of the WVS:

1. In a 2-level linear modelling of the desire for democracy (question E235 in the WVS), with the individual responses to the question about homosexuality as the independent variable in
Combination with a random factor at the national level, the coefficient on the homosexuality question has a t-value of -8 for East Asia (greater tolerance of homosexuality goes with lower importance of democracy), but a t-value of +9 for the rest of the world where greater tolerance goes with higher importance of democracy to the respondent.

2. We obtain the same difference between East Asia and the rest of the World using maximum-likelihood cluster models. These models have the advantage of classifying the data with no need for the distributional assumptions that underlie least squares, factor analysis or traditional cluster analysis. Even if relations are non-linear or non-uniform, the ML cluster analysis will indicate whether significant associations exist. In our case, membership of the cluster with respondents who are above average in their desire for democracy and their general level of trust is strongly predicted by their dislike of homosexuality in East Asia ($p$-value $6 \times 10^{-11}$) but by their tolerance of homosexuality in the rest of the world ($p$-value $3 \times 10^{-57}$). The even larger significance levels for the cluster models suggest that the two opposite relationships are not linear and perhaps not even uniform — and no known theory suggests that they must be. But the significance of the differences between East Asia and the rest of the world cannot be in doubt.

We do take issue with Welzel’s dismissive comments about the democratic culture in Korea and Taiwan. When Inglehart and Welzel wrote their 2005 book, they started the chapter on measuring democracy praising (and working with) the indices of democracy developed by Polity and Freedom House. We copied that and also looked at the more recent index published by the Economist magazine. On all three counts, Korea and Taiwan are on par with established Western democracies. Now, in order to deprecate the level of democracy in Korea and Taiwan, these indices are dismissed and replaced by an own construct. Why this substitution? Welzel’s newly calculated index of democracy has a stronger correlation with the author’s own measurement of emancipative values. That is circular reasoning.

We know from post-war Western history that little or no systematic connection was present between a healthy democracy and voters who were tolerant about homosexuality, abortion, divorce or euthanasia. Think of the UK in the early post-war period: a mature democracy, but still driving homosexuals to suicide. Or of Italy, democratic in its frequent changes of government coalitions, but until recently with a divorzio all’italiano that was a lot funnier in the movie than in reality. In the
history of these two countries political tolerance and respect for the rights of losers in national
elections were not obviously connected to tolerance in private sexual and family matters. We caution
that what was true historically in Europe is still true today in East Asia. All East Asian nations have
subscribed to the universal values in the Charter of the United Nations, but it does not follow that
they have to abandon their cultural heritage or assimilate all aspects of today's dominant Western
culture. Japan is a modern example of a mature democracy that has well preserved many traditional
aspects of its culture, an important part of its own national identity. Cross-cultural researchers
should be aware of specific local cultural contexts and not apply Western formulas for data reduction
to East Asia without testing whether that is appropriate.
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