



## Individualism in Europe: A Comparison to Asia

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### ABSTRACT

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The motto of *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* was originated in Europe in the 18th century. A desire to be on one's own and go freely has been spread worldwide. Every individual is valued more than ever, each individual is an independent spirit who could express the creativity of their's own volition. It can be said that individualism is one of the core values that lead to the development of Europe as it is today. It is worth studying how "individualism" develops in Europe and compare it to Asia where "individualism" promotes its own values besides collectivism while being influenced by the West. This will involve a specific model that blends the European idea of individual autonomy with Asian collectivism. Europeans take part in the decision-making process through the family so as to create a close relationship between the individual and the family; the Asian culture has to be self-sufficient. Implementing this concept would reduce the chances of exploiting of common men in general and fragile groups in particular.

### KEYWORDS:

individualism, European studies, freedom, autonomy, privacy, self-development

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#### 1. DEFINITION OF INDIVIDUALISM

The term of individualism was derived from the 19th century and has been "used in a great many ways, in many different contexts and with an exceptional lack of precision" [Realo, 2002]. According to Steven Lukes in "The Meanings of 'Individualism'" [Lukes, 1971], the term was first used by the European, reacting to the French Revolution, more specifically, from its declared source, the Enlightenment's concept has a rich semantic history. Early ideas of individualism in social and political theory included the ideas of the maximum welfare and freedom of the individual, and society exists only for the sake of its members. More specifically, individualism is a "political and social philosophy that places a high value on the freedom of the individual and, in general, emphasizes the self-directed, self-contained, and comparatively unrestrained individual or ego."<sup>1</sup> Luke's definition included the basic characteristics of individualism to promote human freedom from which people can choose according to their wishes, and do not want to be influenced by external factors.

In psychology, Hofstede<sup>2</sup>, analyzed the factors and described the influence of the social culture on people and

how these values related to their behavior. He said individualism pertains to a society in which the ties between individuals are loose, and everyone is expected to look only after himself or herself and his or her immediate family [Realo, 2002]. In Hofstede's view, individualism does not emphasize the freedom of personal growth, as opposed to Steven Lukes, but emphasizes the detachment of each individual from society and takes society as its main subject. In fact, individualism is not the opposition to society; it is rather a form of life made possible by a certain structure of society, with a central state and a high level of differentiation that requires large-scale coordination.

#### 2. BASIC VALUES OF INDIVIDUALISM IN EUROPE

##### a. Dignity of man

The first characteristic of Individualism, according to Lukes is the *dignity of man*. In individualist societies (in Europe – especially in Western Europe), where everyone is considered responsible for their own lives. It also stresses that people should be able to solve problems or accomplish goals on their own without having to rely on assistance from others. People

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com), access 05/03/2020).  
<sup>2</sup> Gerard Hendrik Hofstede (1928 –2020) was a Dutch social psychologist and Professor Emeritus of Organizational Anthropology and International Management at Maastricht University in the Netherlands, he was famous for his research on cross-cultural groups and organizations.

are often expected to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" when they encounter setbacks [Cherry, 2020]. The concept of human dignity as a high moral value is the first component of individualism. Another vision follows the vision of man's individual dignity: the world defiled by original sin and sin's repercussions create social injustice. In modern day, there had been protests and even absolute refusals to the concept of individualism. The principle of human dignity has been enshrined in the 1948 UN General Assembly's Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood" [The UN, 1948]. The modern idea of man's dignity derives from Immanuel Kant, who was the first in European philosophy, proclaimed that man must always be recognized as a human being, never merely as an object. Lukes concludes that "the idea of the dignity of the individual has the logical status of a moral axiom, which is basic, ultimate, and overriding, offering a general justifying principle in moral argument" [Lukes, 2006]. The concept of dignity of man is the foundation for the idea of democracy and democratic institutions of the state, the idea of law, and guarantees the right of access to reliable information. Since the existence of this concept in society, specifically in social life, is also dependent on the individual right to autonomy.

#### b. Autonomy

The Western European orientations is best described in the slogan of the French Revolution — *liberté, égalité, et fraternité*. 'Liberté' implies the centrality of individual freedom, a pledge to self-reliance. The idea of autonomy becomes a core value for liberalism. The idea of autonomy is central for the morality "of modern Western civilization, and — as highlights — it is absent or under-stressed in others (such as many tribal moralities or that of orthodox communism in Eastern Europe today)". It is a cornerstone element for the concept of individualism that holds the religious and socio-political aspects [Saidbek, 2016]. Each individual has unique experiences and distinct genetic makeup and personality that give rise to individual differences in personal values within societies.

In this way, they strengthened the belief that every individual is unique and is responsible for his actions. The concept of autonomy also is the foundation for modern theories about the individual's rights and freedoms in culture and politics. According to Lukes, people who contributed the most to the development of these ideas were Spinoza and Kant. Spinoza<sup>3</sup> understands freedom as a feature of knowledge; freedom is characterized as the understanding of need. On the other hand, Spinoza often recognizes freedom in a practical sense: when a man does not prevent himself

from going anywhere, he prepares for his own path. In this context, the external circumstances: lack of opportunity to relocate, punishment in the form of prison, and as the ultimate form - servitude are the causes of the lack of freedom. Likewise, the physical circumstances stated above prevent man from thinking on the freeway and being mindful of the effects of things. "This is that human freedom, which all boast that they possess, and which consists solely in fact, that men are conscious of their own desire, but are ignorant of the cause whereby that desire has been determined" [Spinoza, 1955]. Nevertheless, purely the release of effects helps man to get on the path to reality. In Spinoza's belief, man is free not merely that he is not prevented from planning, but his direction is free when he is the possessor of the truth, he enters the knowledge from the highest level.

#### c. Privacy

*Privacy* indicates the presence of personal life, which man has the obligation and right to treat as exclusively on his own and to which other people may have a connection to man's consent.

One merely needs to underplay the playfulness inherent in this concept and divert attention to individual choice; it starts to closely resemble what late Thomas Franck considered the mark of law in an era of individualism. According to Franck, the contemporary international system has given rise to an "emerging right to individuality" [Franck, 1999], which is concomitant to the demise of the nation as the defining factor of who people are. The modern individualism recognizes people as having their own "unique" identity, independent of "law, tradition, history and faith." They "create" their "freely chosen identities," thus drawing on a variety of available options which has increasingly grown. Franck seems to conclude that the right to individuality, arising from the confluence of a variety of human rights, is most appropriately epitomized by the right to privacy.

When industrialization and commercial developed, it is almost difficult for an individual to live an isolated and self-sufficient existence without interaction with others and with society, and thus a clear boundary has become important for the security of individual rights, interests, and properties. Therefore, the issues of free trade, market competition and private property are critical to European individualism.

#### d. Self-development

The fourth fundamental concept that Lukes called as one of the Individualism's principles is self-development. This concept means that each human being has the only unit of his proper strength, ability, and duty to grow. The first thought that every individual is special was posed by Rousseau in *Les Confessions*; he wrote that "I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in

universe, he came to be considered one of the great rationalists of 17th-century philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> A Dutch philosopher (1632 - 1677) of Portuguese Sephardi origin, one of the early thinkers of the Enlightenment and modern biblical criticism, including modern conceptions of the self and the

the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different” [Saibek, 2016]. Friedrich Schleiermacher’s<sup>4</sup> works showed that each entity represents all humanity in each other, if one develops his abilities and others do the same, so one contributes to the development of human species. As John Stuart Mill emphasizes that self-development is a method to refine the essence of an individual, it is every person’s goal. Nations in a high democratic state are nations with cultures that emphasize that people should follow and express their own thoughts and feelings legitimately and desirably. Personal actions are viewed as the key cause of success or failure. Individualistic traits are reflected by values of self-determination or self-efficacy.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, individualism is different depending on historical terms in Europe. It is possible to meet even now in Europe, people for whom the idea of individualism is still an alien idea. The ideas constitutive for individualism developed differently in different countries, depending on historical conditions. But everywhere the idea of human dignity, individual autonomy are reflected in legislation, judicial procedures, and social institutions, which increasingly emphasize the primacy of individual interests over the interest group, the right to choose the entirely own way of life, lifestyle, etc [Saibek, 2016]. However, it is worth noting that European intellectual elite’s voices alert against the challenges which are posed by the growth of individualism to fundamental changes in society. Knowing the fear of European citizens’ institutions lets them put the public interest under their own interests. Understanding the concerns of the Europe’s citizens allows them to place their own interests above the notion of sovereignty, independence, privacy, and self-fulfillment of common interests.

### 3. IN COMPARISON TO ASIA

For thousands of years, Asia has always been the cradle of collective views. Nevertheless, the awareness of individuality was present even in ancient Asian cultures and even before the age of classical Greece. In Asian history, scholars often had a hermit-style, this is eremitism, the refusal to join into or withdrawal from society is cherished by them as well as many characters in the novel as a statement of their independence. Obviously, eremitism cannot be easily assimilated to individualism. However, if the eremitism is for the sake of keeping individual privately and adhering to one’s own personal ideal, and if it is someone’s unrestrained self-determination and personal choice. It does have a relation with individualism. It also claims that the way Asians view the world and rule is different. They tried to find answers from ancient philosophy. Asians thought that the object and its surroundings, however, are constantly interacting. The

object itself is not described by itself. If it is in a different situation, the identity and characteristic of the object itself will adapt and interact with it. The traditional Asian philosophies of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism have affected the development and formation of Asian cultural values. These could be summed up as the social attitudes of educational enthusiasm and obedience, to have an economic framework of long-term investment and life-long employment which is built on the system of seniority that man should reduce his individualism in order to better harmonize with society.

#### a. Similarity

Siedentop stated that “the *moral equality* of humans, on a status shared equally by all”. In Siedentop’s story, St. Paul’s teachings are essential in crafting this sense of moral equality: “Paul uses Jesus’ emphasis on the fatherhood of God to insist on the brotherhood of man” [Siedentop, 2014]. What makes us all equal is our shared status as children of God. Same as in China, Mencius sees the individual body as a universal source of cosmic authority, and natural pattern and the term typically described a social theory advocating the liberty, rights, or independent action of the individual. Moreover, individualism was a byword for Japan’s reforming intelligentsia, inspired by pioneering modernizer Yukichi Fukuzawa’s proclamation of “national independence through personal independence” a century ago [O’Wdyer, 2013]. In Vietnam, a nation with an individual ego obscured by the hierarchy and bloodline, the “*ego*” that entrusted and dissipated into the blood and social relations, leading to being obscured and overshadowed. But the faint lights of individualism also appeared through the work of poet Ho Xuan Huong<sup>5</sup>; she wrote: “Khéo khéo đi đâu lữ ngắn ngo? /Lại đây chị dạy làm thơ” (Where are you going, my dear little greenhorns? Here, I’ll teach you how to turn a verse or two) or Nguyen Trai<sup>6</sup> said: “Cho biết rõ cái thằng tao (To know who I am)”. It is the provisional and conditional affirmation, leaning toward circumstance, not the social relation of the “I” in a higher or equal position because the “I” of Vietnamese always was always put behind family and society. Generally, the awareness of individualism had appeared quite early both in Europe and Asia, and all emphasize the equality between people in any era, any country or any civilization or culture, people always have aspiration, exposing the inner self in one way or another.

#### b. Difference

There are certain differences in the ways of thinking and the approach of individualism of Europe and Asia due to different approaches. For example, Chinese manifestations of “individualism” do not stress an individual’s separation, total

<sup>4</sup> A German theologian (1768 –1834), philosopher, and biblical scholar known for his attempt to reconcile the criticisms of the Enlightenment with traditional Protestant Christianity.

<sup>5</sup> A Vietnamese poet born at the end of the Le dynasty.

<sup>6</sup> An illustrious Vietnamese Confucian scholar, a noted poet, a skilled politician, and a master strategist.

independence, and uniqueness from external authorities of power [Brindley, 2020]. European culture tends to view the individual in an atomized, independence, whereas Chinese culture focuses on the person as a vitally integrated entity within a larger family, social, political, and cosmic whole. European philosophy and culture focus mainly on freedom of choice but does not aim to provide the degree of interdependent support that exists in Chinese society.

While Europe addressed individualism in terms of egalitarian rights, individuation, and human responsibilities during its political growth, Asian may have concentrated on the growth of individuality. This divergence gives rise to fundamental differences in the formation of citizenship. The former is political and bureaucratic, but the latter is apolitical, focusing on self-enrichment, which may or may not lead to political ends [Lee, 2004]. This helps to explain the prevalence of soft authoritarianism and social democracy. Europeans are concerned about human rights and responsibilities in terms of citizenship, but Asians are concerned about the fulfillment of individuality.

In Japan, individualism means being independent of others while also actively establishing social ties. In comparison, to be autonomous and achieve "individualism," the Japanese might feel a need to separate themselves from interconnected relationships. In European cultures, individualism has been fostered over a long period of time, so that people have adequate strategies that have been developed through socialization. Under individualistic systems, the Japanese tend to cut off interpersonal relationships but do not actively build new close interpersonal relationships as an important source of happiness in Japan [Ogihara, Uchida, 2014].

Differences in individualism lead to the dissimilarity in operation, management, domestic and foreign policy on both sides. For example, since the 1130s, in England, King Henry I has given London' citizens the right to choose their own sheriff and judge. In contrast, Asian monarchy did not grant people the right to vote for anyone to become king, and their individuality focused on the elites who focused on cultivating themselves to become a perfect being. In modern times, the "I" of Asians is not perceived freely, the "I" is always overshadowed by the common.

When science and technology developed along with it is globalization - "a process by which cultures influence one another and become more alike through trade, immigration, and the exchange of information and ideas" [Arnett, 2002], the idea of Individualism becomes clearer than ever in Asian countries. Globalization allows greater mobility of individuals, items, money, and knowledge through countries, makes cultures become not only multicultural but also much more Westernized or European-Americanized.

Given the fact that Asia and Europe diverge economically in terms of the two cultural dimensions, the Asian economies should be acknowledged as a miracle, despite the small degree of individualism that exists in these

Asian economic powers. The outperformance of all other Asian economies is their feasibility of accepting technologies from some Western economies [Yong, 2019]. Asian cultures are at a high risk of exploitation by researchers and physicians, as the autonomy of individuals is second in contrast to the decision of the older people. This will involve a specific model that blends the European idea of individual autonomy with Asian collectivism.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Individualism in Europe is a cultural characteristic that emphasizes individuality and promotes one's own personal achievements; it increases one's willingness to open new enterprises and pursue one's own ideas, despite possible failure. Individuals have not only a monetary reward from creativity but also a social prestige reward in an individualistic society, thereby allocating more research to creative practices.

In Asia, where collectivism has dominated for a long time, there was the existence of individualism, but Asians' approach to individualism was not systematically as it was in Europe. In Europe, people viewed the individual in an atomized, independence, while Asian focused on the person as a vitally integrated entity within a larger family, society, and politics. Europe addressed individualism in terms of egalitarian rights, individuation, and human responsibilities during its political growth, Asian have concentrated on the fulfillment of individuality's prosperity. However, due to a lack of documentation, the study has not been able to approach issues such as the influence of individualism on European society through some periods of development, etc. In the future, the research will become more complete by adding the positive and negative effects of individualism on the European economy, politics, and society, as well as adding case studies to highlight the importance of the value to the development of Europe. Not only that, in Asia, it will also be more comprehensive to shape individualism according to Buddhism, Confucianism, Confucianism, and Islam. The individualization process is strongly and positively associated with economic growth and innovation, indicating that if countries want to continue their modernization process, they need to promote the individualization process and enhance individual liberty and autonomy.

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