

Shared and Divergent Value Structures in Southeast Asia: Evidence From the World Values Survey

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Abstract

This study examines the latent value dimensions underlying moral, political, and social attitudes in Southeast Asia using data from the Wave 7 of the World Values Survey. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted separately for Southeast Asia as a whole and for individual countries (Philippines, Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia) to identify consistent and divergent patterns in value orientations. Despite variation in specific item loadings across contexts, three relatively robust factors emerged: (1) Ethics/Moral Liberalism/Conservative Boundaries, capturing attitudes toward sexuality, family, and life-related issues (e.g., homosexuality, divorce, abortion, euthanasia); (2) Democratic Values, Egalitarianism, encompassing beliefs in elections, civil rights, gender equality, and state responsibility for redistribution; and (3) Rule breaking/Corruption Tolerance/Integrity, reflecting permissiveness toward dishonest practices such as bribery, cheating on taxes, and misusing benefits. In some countries, additional dimensions surfaced, such as Science–Democracy Optimism (Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand) or Subjective Wellbeing and Life Control (Myanmar, Thailand). The regional (SEA) results broadly align with the core factors but smooth over country-specific distinctions, underscoring the importance of examining both aggregate and national-level structures. Overall, the findings reveal both a shared regional moral-political architecture and culturally specific emphases, offering insights into how Southeast Asian societies negotiate issues of morality, governance, corruption, and the role of science and democracy in everyday life.

Keywords: World Values Survey, Exploratory Factor Analysis, values structures

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Introduction

Scholarly debates on values in Asia have often been framed through the lens of “Asian Values,” a discourse that tends to essentialize cultural orientations and associate them with fixed preferences for hierarchy, social order, or authoritarian governance. While influential, such approaches risk obscuring internal diversity and empirical variation within and across societies. This study adopts a different stance. Rather than presupposing a coherent regional value system, it examines empirically grounded value constructs as they are expressed and structured at the individual level in selected Southeast Asian countries using World Values Survey data. By treating values as multidimensional, potentially tension-laden, and context-dependent, the study shifts attention from cultural generalizations to observable configurations of values and their relationships.

Literature Review

Using four waves of global World Values Survey (WVS), Inglehart and Welzel (2005) identified two dimensions of values using factor analysis. The first dimension is a contrast of traditional values with secular-rational values. Traditional values prioritize religion, parent-child relationships, respect for authority, and family-oriented norms, while secular-rational values focus on opposing preferences, such as less emphasis on these traditional elements. The second dimension distinguishes between survival values and self-expression values. Survival values prioritize economic and physical security, whereas self-expression values emphasize environmental protection, increased tolerance for diversity (including acceptance of foreigners, LGBTQ+ individuals, and gender equality), and greater advocacy for participation in political and economic decision-making.

Social structures and values are deeply interconnected. Values play a crucial role in shaping and sustaining social structures, while social structures, in turn, influence the formation and prioritization of values. Martin-Jones (1997) documented how Singapore leveraged traditional values to encourage citizen’s participation in economic development, illustrating the strong link between social values and economic progress. Similarly, Cáceres-Carrasco et al. (2020) noted that personal values drive innovation, with their impact is moderated by society's level of economic development.

Zhang (2019) demonstrated a correlation between political freedom and liberal attitudes, illustrating how values are influenced by broader political conditions. Values are also shaped by and reflective of cultural contexts (Kluckhohn, 1951; Tsirogianni & Gaskell, 2011). Recognizing the contextual variability of values is crucial, as Bilon and Clemente (2023) emphasized, given their role in shaping the cultural framework. In this regard, Welzel and Alexander (2008) confirmed the connection between societal conditions and empowering regimes in fostering people-centered development.

Focusing solely on values risks attributing undue blame to individuals, ignoring the structural influences that shape them. Therefore, while maintaining an understanding of the structure-values relationship, a nuanced analysis of values and their determinants remain essential.

WVS was used by many researchers to study a wide range of topics. Li and Bond (2010) showed that different cultures respond to globalization differently and that the shift towards secular values is gradual. Ardakani and Saenz (2022) used household income levels from WVS to compare inequality measures. Morselli and Passini (2012) showed that disobedience when

associated with values of inclusiveness, is positively linked to pro-democratic individual attitudes and to the enhancement of democracy at the institutional levels. Loll and Hall (2018) provided evidence using WVS that abortion attitudes are affected by policy context and respondents' sex, where support for abortion can be found among women and in a less restrictive policy context. Julkif (2024) used WVS in 72 countries in the study and showed empirical evidence for Rational Choice Deterrence Theory—that state terror and a worse perception on human rights is correlated with lower tolerance of deviance. Parhizkari (2024) used the Iran WVS dataset from 2005 and 2020 to provide cultural explanations for the protests in Iran, which were perceived to be led by women. Specifically, evolving values of women with respect to gender equality, the impact of increased levels of education, and the changing ways women socialize thru adoption of new technologies, explained why young women led the protests. Bilon and Clemente (2023) examined homonegativity in Southeast Asian Countries in the WVS dataset, noted that there is no uniform values system that constitutes sexual prejudice which points to the importance of culture and context where values are operating.

Other studies which used WVS highlight the complex relationships between social capital, societal values, and their impacts on socio-economic and health outcomes. Lindstrom (2020) and Elgar et al. (2020) emphasize how income inequality and dimensions of social capital (e.g., trust, civic engagement) influenced COVID-19 mortality, revealing disparities in public health outcomes. Bruni and Stanca (2006) linked media consumption to diminished income-satisfaction relationships. On the other hand, Cowley and Smith (2014) show that intrinsic motivation is higher in public sector workers, influenced by corruption levels. Lim et al. (2019) and Aleman and Woods (2016) underscore cultural and contextual factors, finding societal values moderate happiness and questioning the universal stability of mass value dimensions. These studies summarize the importance of tailor-fitting analyses on values to socio-economic and cultural contexts.

Methodology

Data Description

The World Values Survey (WVS) is based on a nationally representative sample ($n = 1,200$) that collects data on social, political, economic, religious and cultural values (WVS, 2021). The Philippine Segment of the 7th wave (2019) was used as this is a reasonable reference period for various socio-political events in the Philippines like government policy “War on Drugs” and the upcoming national election in 2022.

Respondents for WVS were selected using multi-stage sampling. Sampling units at different levels (regions, provinces, cities/towns, and barangays) were selected using probability proportional to size. Respondents are eligible adults (voting-age) in a sample household and were selected using a Kish Grid. Data was gathered through face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire was translated, pre-tested, and finalized for fieldwork, see Haerpfer et al. (2020) and SWS (2020) for details on survey methodology and the instruments used.

Latent Factors of Values

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was used to uncover the latent structure underlying scale items (Widaman, 2018). Initial communality estimates are derived from squared multiple correlations (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Conceptual and practical considerations were basis

of initial selection of variables to be included. Conceptually, Widaman (2012) suggests that measured variables should be selected after careful consideration of the domain of interest. A broad list of variables that are reasonably (Watkins, 2020) related to governance, democracy, ethics and norms, and socio-economic class were selected. The inclusion of a broad list of indicators was intended to induce robustness of the choice of features to be included in surfacing the latent structure.

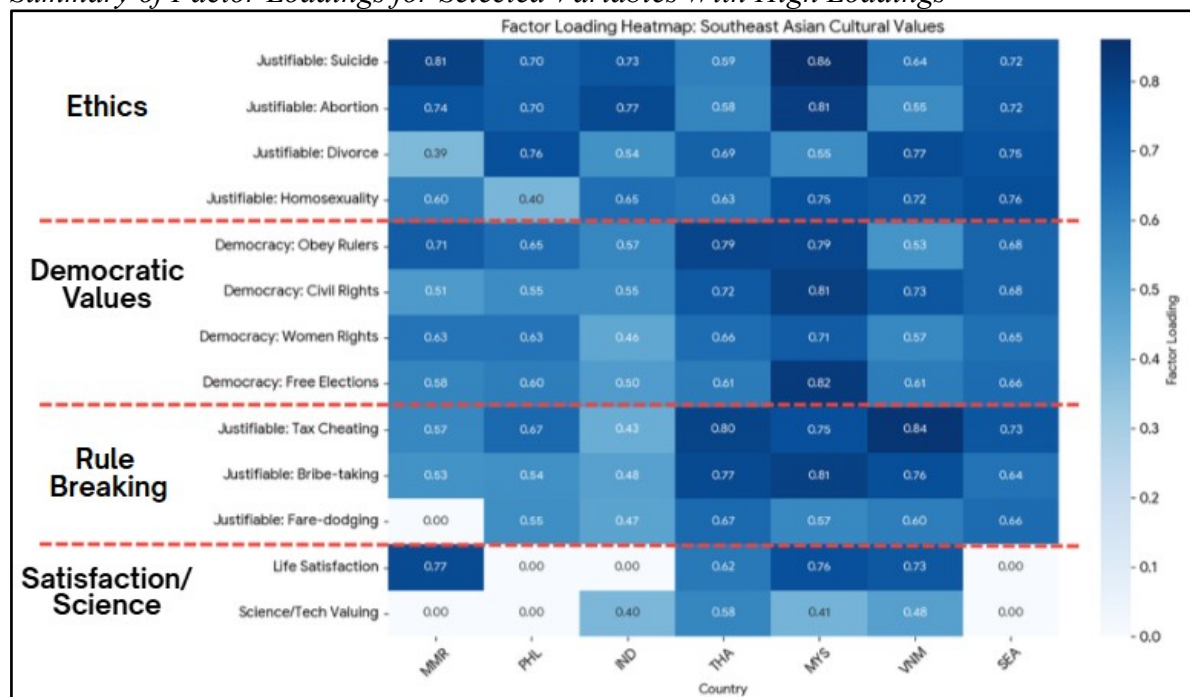
Results

Summary and Visualization of Findings

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to identify the latent value structures of citizens across several Southeast Asian (SEA) nations, utilizing data from the World Values Survey (WVS). The analysis revealed distinct factor structures for each country, generally ranging from three to four factors, which describe the intersection of personal morality, democratic expectations, and civic life.

Figure 1

Summary of Factor Loadings for Selected Variables With High Loadings



Note/Source: Author's computation

In Figure 1, we have a heatmap which shows the clustering of values highlighting selected variables with high factor loadings. They are clustered according to the following values label: Ethics, Democracy, Rule Breaking, and Science and Life Satisfaction.

To interpret the heatmap, dark blue means high possibility of polarization. Some would strongly agree and some would strongly disagree on this value. Lighter blue means a non-strict and negotiable definition of this value.

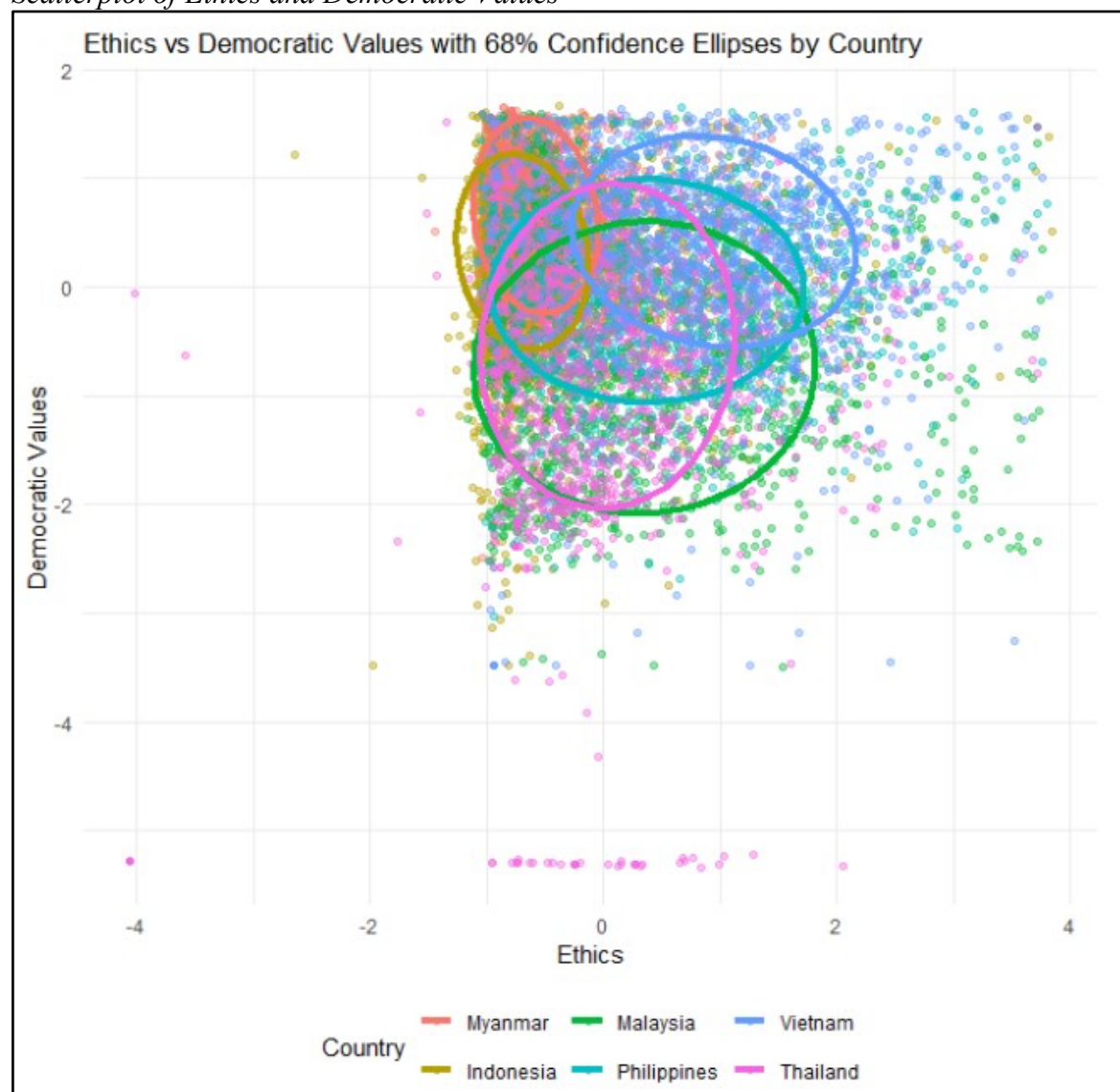
We see that:

- 1) Malaysia and Thailand seem to have more dark blue across all clusters of values.
- 2) The Philippines and Indonesia tend to have a negotiated meaning of democracy.
- 3) Focusing on one value, Homosexuality (that was the term used in the questionnaire), we see that it is mostly dark blue except for the Philippines.
- 4) Fare-dodging is light blue in most countries.
- 5) Notice that life satisfaction and science valuing were not significant in some countries, and they were not clustered together.
- 6) The SEA values smooth out the country differences. It is all dark/semi-dark blue in that column. Hence, there is a need to also pay attention to inter-country analysis.

Individual factor scores were estimated for each respondent to operationalize a spatial analysis of cultural values. This approach allows us to project individuals onto a multi-dimensional grid, constructing a cultural “social map” heavily inspired by the pioneering sociological framework of Pierre Bourdieu. In the subsequent coordinate graphs, higher axes represent greater moral tolerance (*Ethics/Moral Flexibility*), a stronger endorsement of democratic principles (*Democracy Values*), and a higher justification for civic infractions (*Rule-Breaking*).

The resulting distributions reveal a distinct regional trend: the vast majority of Southeast Asian respondents cluster tightly around high support for democratic values coupled with low tolerance for personal moral choices such as divorce, homosexuality, and abortion. However, the dispersion varies significantly by country. Respondents in Myanmar and Indonesia exhibit much tighter, high-density clusters, indicating a strong societal consensus. In contrast, other nations show a wider spread, pointing to a more diverse or potentially polarized value landscape within those populations.

Figure 2
Scatterplot of Ethics and Democratic Values



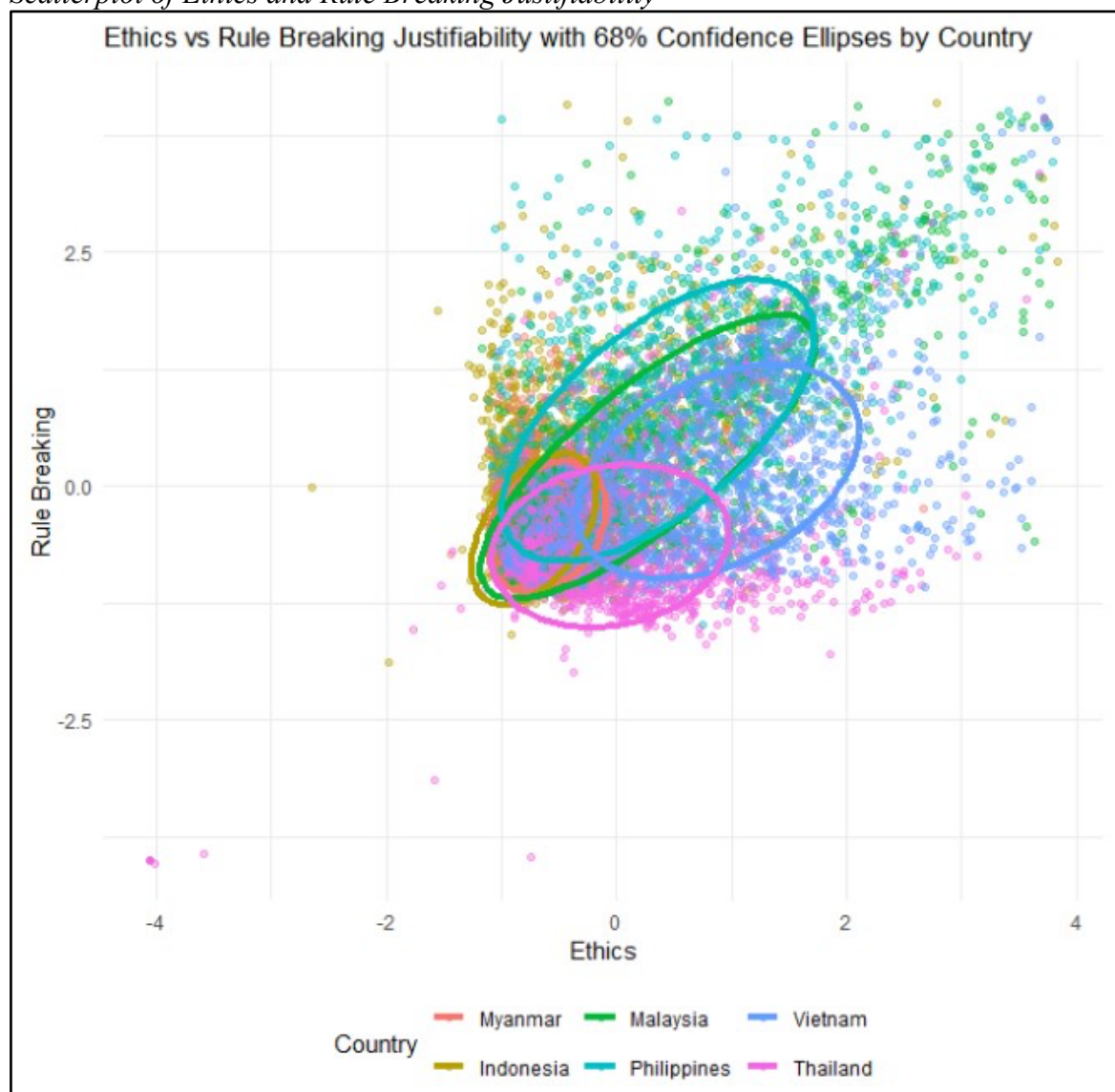
Note/Source: Author's computation

Most are clustered in high appreciation of democratic values AND low tolerance and acceptance of social acts such as divorce, homosexuality, and abortion. But the spread per country is varied quite a lot with Myanmar and Indonesia having respondents tighter to each other compared to the rest.

Figure 3*Scatterplot of Democratic Values and Rule Breaking Justifiability**Note/Source:* Author's computation

Here we see that different levels of appreciation of democratic values co-varies with low justifiability or acceptance of rule-breaking behavior. This points to a framework where Democracy is seen a mechanism towards reinforcing the norm and social order. Again, we also see some points diverting from this trend coming from different countries.

Figure 4
Scatterplot of Ethics and Rule Breaking Justifiability



Note/Source: Author's computation

In this dimension, the relationship between the two axes exhibits a distinct, positive linear correlation. Heightened tolerance toward non-traditional personal choices—such as abortion, homosexuality, suicide, and divorce—directly co-varies with a greater justification for civic infractions and rule-breaking behaviors. This structural overlap implies that within this specific cultural framework, private moral choices and formal legal transgressions are conceptualized along the exact same continuum of norm violation. In essence, unconventional personal morality and institutional non-compliance are treated as functionally equivalent deviations from established societal boundaries.

Regional Commonalities in Value Structures

Across all surveyed nations, a robust Support for Democratic Values factor emerged as a consistent pillar of the value landscape. This factor was primarily defined by variables related to civil rights, free elections, and gender equality. Notably, in the majority of these nations, the item “People obey their rulers” (E233B) consistently loaded onto the democracy factor (e.g.,

loadings of 0.709 in Myanmar and 0.786 in Malaysia). This suggests a regional conceptualization of democracy that emphasizes social order and institutional stability alongside liberal rights. Additionally, a Moral Flexibility (or Permissiveness) factor was present in every country, tracking the degree to which individuals justify various personal and social behaviors, such as divorce, abortion, and casual sex.

Country-Specific Narrative Results

In Myanmar, a three-factor solution was identified. The first factor, Moral Flexibility, was broad in scope, with high loadings for the justification of suicide (0.805) and violence (0.756). The second factor, Support for Democratic Values, emphasized both ruler obedience (0.709) and gender equality (0.632). Unique to Myanmar was the third factor, Life Satisfaction, which integrated subjective health (0.726) and financial satisfaction (0.689), suggesting that personal well-being is viewed as a holistic, unified construct.

The Philippines displayed a three-factor structure that highlighted a clear distinction between personal and civic ethics. While Factor 1 (Moral Flexibility) captured social justifications such as prostitution (0.766) and divorce (0.755), Factor 3 (Rule-breaking & Corruption) emerged as a separate domain. This suggests that Filipino respondents differentiate between personal “moral” choices and “civic” transgressions, such as tax evasion (0.669) and bribe-taking (0.538).

Indonesia’s results indicated a three-factor structure characterized by Moral Discipline. Factor 3 uniquely combined civic rule-breaking with Science-Valuing and work ethics (e.g., “People who don’t work turn lazy,” 0.443). This indicates a conceptual link between scientific advancement and societal discipline. Furthermore, Indonesia’s democratic factor included a significant loading for religious authorities interpreting laws (0.426), reflecting a religious-institutional dimension of democracy.

Thailand and Vietnam both required a four-factor solution to explain the variance in the data. In Thailand, science and technology were linked to two separate domains: Progressive Morality (Factor 3) and Life Satisfaction (Factor 4). This suggests that for Thai citizens, scientific progress is both a moral and a personal well-being indicator. Similarly, Vietnam’s fourth factor, Science Valuing, Democracy & Life Satisfaction, suggested that technological progress is intrinsically tied to personal happiness (0.726) and freedom of choice (0.624). Vietnam’s first factor was also unique in its strong focus on the Justifiability of Violence, grouping physical force and civic cheating into a single transgressive category.

The analysis for Malaysia revealed a three-factor solution with exceptionally high internal consistency in Factor 1, General Moral Permissiveness. High loadings across nearly all justification variables (e.g., political violence at 0.887 and suicide at 0.86) suggest a highly polarized moral landscape. Factor 3 linked life satisfaction with a perceived lack of political agency, evidenced by a negative loading on the ability to “have a say in what the government does” (-0.454).

Conclusion

A Southeast-Asian nuanced structure of values were derived and summarized as follows:

The “Asian Democracy” Model. Across almost all countries, “Support for Democracy” includes a strong expectation for social order (obeying rules) and economic equality (state-led wealth redistribution).

The Science-Happiness Bridge. In Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia, scientific advancement is psychologically linked to personal freedom and happiness, moving away from science as a purely academic or industrial field.

Segmented vs. Integrated Morality. Some nations (Philippines) treat civic duty and personal choice as separate worlds, while others (Malaysia, Myanmar) view all moral and civic justifications as part of a single, broad spectrum of permissiveness.

The competitiveness and cultural flourishing of our Southeast Asia could depend on a nuanced understanding of values structures in the region. We see that there is much diversity and also much similarity. The overlap of values preferences across countries are substantial. Diversity exists within and between countries. Our diverse language, political, and water borders hinder us to converge culturally. Much can be done if we want to tap our potential to converge and build a stronger Southeast Asian Region.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

ChatGPT and Gemini3 were used only for technical editing, clustering of ideas, and rephrasing of some paragraphs of the drafts, compliance with APA citation, and in providing the sketch of the R codes. The ideas, drafts, final version, draft R codes and final R codes were curated, re-read, and edited by the author.

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