Although culturalist ideas formed part of a broad postcolonial discourse from an early stage in the post-Second World War period, rapidly changing conditions following the end of the Cold War saw cultural politics move to centre stage in various parts of the world. It was especially pronounced in the Asia-Pacific where the economic dynamism of the region prompted proclamations of a coming ‘Pacific century’ by commentators from such diverse sites as the world of international business to cultural studies. This gave rise to a species of regional identity in the form of a ‘new Asianism’ dependent not only on a stereotypical and over-homogenized representation of ‘Asia’ but also an equally stereotypical construction of ‘the West’. The deployment of Confucianism provided the original basis for a version of ‘Asian values’ that later became projected more broadly across the region. As noted earlier, discourses on these themes have become muted in the post-9/11 world, but the more general implications for understanding cultural politics in the international sphere remain important. The use of a cultural category such as Confucianism to underscore alternative models of democracy also raises the issue of how cultural diversity may be accommodated in democratic theory and how democracy ‘fits’ into different contexts. Communitarian approaches to these issues have generally revolved around three inter-related arguments. The first is that the development of democracy is specific to the modern industrialized ‘West’ and is not necessarily valid for other contexts. The second holds that for democracy to take root outside ‘the West’, it must be modified to suit local cultural contexts, sometimes drastically so. A third argument is that, in some places, there are pre-existing or indigenous political forms that are essentially democratic and far more appropriate in the local context than any introduced species could possibly be. In an era which has seen democracy
promotion by force, these arguments are well worth considering. But there are also a number of problems, as we shall see below.

The new Asianism

The ‘new Asianism’ refers to a way of imagining Asia, or more especially the sub-region of Pacific Asia, in terms which are thought to distinguish it from other regions, but especially ‘the West’. The phenomenon does not constitute a single, uncontested body of ideas formulated, or subscribed to, by an easily identifiable set of actors. On the contrary, it lends itself to a number of different interpretations. It includes, but is not limited to, the ‘Asian values debate’, a discourse focusing largely on human rights and democracy issues and situated within the broader set of discourses about the rise of Asia in world affairs. Proponents of ‘Asian values’ have been ostensibly concerned to counter hegemonic Western discourses and to reassert an Asian subjectivity and an Asian version of modernity based on authentic cultural and moral values.

The ‘new’ in ‘new Asianism’ distinguishes the contemporary phenomenon from earlier periods in which the idea of Asia, as well as a notion of ‘pan-Asianism’ was prominent. The latter notion flourished in the nineteenth century and in the earlier part of the twenty-first century until the onset of the Second World War. Focusing primarily on the idea of a struggle against Western imperialism, it may be seen as a defensive reaction to Western pressures, serving as an adjunct to nationalism and instrumentally subservient to it. The ‘new’ Asianism was formulated in the post-independence period, building principally on the idea of an underlying set of shared cultural values shaping both the political and the economic destiny of the region. Throughout much of the 1990s it was borne along on the tide of spectacular economic growth which fuelled assumptions about the role of cultural forces driving it. Commentators talked readily of an ‘Asian renaissance’ and a coming ‘Pacific century’. The economic boom was initially led by Japanese exports as well as investment in industry and technology. From the late 1960s Japan was joined by the ‘Four Dragons’, or newly industrialized countries/economies (NICs or NIEs) – Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea – and then in the 1980s by Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. Since then, China has come to occupy much attention in the analysis of economic and other trends and continues to play an increasingly prominent role in regional and world affairs into the twenty-first century. Despite recession in Japan in the early 1990s and the regional financial crisis in 1997, the overall achievements in