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BOOK REVIEW

The great Eastern promise

By Asad Latif, For The Straits Times

Title: The New Asian Hemisphere
The Irresistible Shift Of Global Power To The East
Author: Kishore Mahbubani



Publisher: New York: Public Affairs, 2008: 314 pages (US\$26)

ROSY OUTLOOK: A punter monitoring share prices in Shanghai as China enjoys strong economic growth. In defending Beijing's credentials for world leadership, Prof Mahbubani criticises Western critics of China who, being obsessed with human rights and democracy, forget how long it took their own societies to get to where they are today. -- PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

THE role of culture in fuelling economic growth sparked a debate over Asian values in the 1980s. The debate peaked in a shrill bout of Asian triumphalism before it was silenced by the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s.

Westerners and those Asians who had scorned the economic claims made on behalf of Asian values declared themselves vindicated by the sight of Asians humbled by the market.

As a senior Singapore diplomat then, Professor Kishore Mahbubani was one of the most articulate and pugnacious participants in the Asian values debate. In this latest book, which is as combative as his earlier writings, he goes beyond the terms of that debate to offer several exciting ideas in the wake of Asia's remarkable recovery from the 1997-1998 financial crisis.

Prof Mahbubani argues that power is shifting to the East, not because Asian societies are rediscovering 'some hidden or forgotten strength of Asian civilisations', but because they are building on 'the pillars of Western wisdom' that have enabled the West to outperform Asian societies in the past two centuries.

The dean of the Lee Kuan Yew

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LETTING GO, GRACEFULLY

'For now, the majority (in Asia) is willing to work with the West. However, if the West tries to continue its domination, a backlash is inevitable.'

PROF MAHBUBANI

School of Public Policy identifies seven such pillars: free-market economics; science and technology; meritocracy; pragmatism; the 'culture of peace' among Western states since the end of World War II; the rule of law; and 'the virtues of Western education'.

The question that arises immediately is this: If emerging Asian powerhouses such as China and India are succeeding by embracing Western wisdom, why should global power be shifting from the West to the East?

Prof Mahbubani replies controversially that the West has entered a period of insecurity in which it is forgetting what made it succeed. Meanwhile, it is Asia that has inherited Western wisdom as the foundation of its success now and in the foreseeable future.

Prof Mahbubani declares: 'We have reached the end of the era of Western domination of world history.' Although the West will remain 'the single strongest civilisation for decades more', the world will witness 'an enormous renaissance of Asian societies'.

It is good to be wary of announcing a renaissance before it has occurred. However, if one did occur in Asia, it would embody a neat historical irony. Asia's rise would represent the universalisation of essentially Western principles and practices - and their triumph not in the lands of their origin, but in the East.

In this hard-hitting but elegantly written book, the author calls on the West to encourage Asia's march to modernity and to share power with it gracefully. To do this would mean overhauling an archaic and undemocratic global order in which 12 per cent of the world's population living in the West control decisions that affect the fate of the rest.

The book makes detailed suggestions on the creation of a new world order. These include the reform of the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank; the institution of a 'single rule of law for all nations'; the search for social justice; and a rejuvenated sense of East-West partnerships.

'For now, the majority (in Asia) is willing to work with the West,' Prof Mahbubani says. 'However, if the West tries to continue its domination, a backlash is inevitable.'

Indeed, he warns that a process of 'de-Westernisation' has begun already, not least in the Islamic world, and that it goes deeper than anti-Americanism.

Prof Mahbubani identifies four candidates for global leadership today: the United States, the European Union, China and India.

The US is the 'strongest candidate' for the position of global leader because it has 'done more good for the world than any other country has', particularly since the end of World War II, he says. However, he senses that the US today is far less confident than it was in 1945 and remarks that 'the gap between it and the world has never been wider'.

Europe's problem is that it has been unable to extend its 'benign influence' outside its borders.

That leaves China and India as two front-line Asian states at a transitional time in world history.

In a stout defence of Beijing's credentials for leadership, Prof Mahbubani criticises Western critics of China who, being obsessed with human rights and democracy, forget how long it took their own societies to get to where they are today.

These critics are ideologically incapable of understanding 'how happy most Chinese are with their current condition', he says. Though it is true that China must move towards democracy eventually, at the moment the Chinese people 'have never been freer'.

The book also warns against moves to exclude China from global governance on the grounds that only a community of democracies can run the world.

It should be noted though that while China wants to be a responsible stakeholder in the global order, it exhibits little interest in leading the creation of that order.

As for India, its natural role is that of a bridge between the East and West. 'No other society is as qualified,' he says. However, India's economic prowess will have to match its strengths as a civilisation for it to provide global leadership.

One question that remains at the end of the book is whether the shift of power to the East will be peaceful, or whether it will be accompanied by rivalry spiralling into conflict among Asia's resurgent states. This is a question he touches upon but could have gone into in greater detail.

It is welcome, of course, that the benefits of economic integration are drawing Asian powers closer. But economic growth is also funding significant levels of military spending. This raises the question of who is whose enemy.

In these transitional times, where danger stalks opportunity, one might well argue that the US remains indispensable as the balancer of last resort in the Asia-Pacific. To put it simply: The new Asian hemisphere may well need America to stay an Asian power.

This said, the book remains an excellent work by one of Singapore's keenest strategic thinkers, pondering on what lies ahead for Asia and the world. It deserves careful study.

The writer, a former Straits Times journalist, is a visiting research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

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