

KISHORE MAHBUBANI

“I am convinced that the 21st century may be the Asian century.”

FOLLOWING his best-selling book *Can Asians Think?* Singaporean Kishore Mahbubani has been variously described as ‘an Asian Toynbee preoccupied with the rise and fall of civilizations’ (*The Economist*) and a ‘prototype 21st century leader’ (*Time*). Indeed, Professor Mahbubani, currently the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School for Public Policy at National University of Singapore, never fails to motivate discourse when speaking or writing publicly. He began his career as a diplomat in 1971, ending as Singapore’s ambassador to the United Nations in 2002, where he served as President of the Security Council. He is now completing his third book on Asia.

What was the motivation behind your well-known, must-read, provocative book ‘Can Asians Think?’

It was very simple. Asians like to believe they are now successful but they need to think harder about their future prospects because if we look back at what Asia has accomplished in the last 1000 years, it hasn’t been a great story. So the question Asians need to ask of themselves is how we lost so many centuries of development. Asian countries have been emerging and taking off only in the last two decades. If we do not figure out all the causes of what went wrong, the danger is that it might happen again.

But aren’t we seeing a change, a kind of a renaissance in Asia right now?

I think we’re seeing the beginnings of a renaissance, but I think Asian countries have so far done the easy things. The first phase of economic development is often the easiest. But as you move up the development ladder, and as you have to compete with the developed societies, you have to show the same capacity for critical thinking that has enabled these societies to propel forward.

What can be done to change it?

We don’t have to reinvent the wheel. Fortunately for us, other societies have succeeded before us and we can learn their best practices. This is happening already in China and India. Emphasis on education and on the rule of law are being gradually implemented, but they

need to be done more systematically. The more we can learn from the developed societies what to do right, the faster we can progress. Take the rule of law: no segment of society, especially the rich and powerful elite, should be immune from the rule of law.

Many people blame it on feudalism, which still exists in many countries.

Feudalism is the critical word. Asian societies have the external trappings of modernity: a parliament, courts, but the culture is very feudal. One of the saddest cases in Southeast Asia is the Philippines. On the surface, the Philippines is openly democratic, but culturally, it’s still very feudal, with a few families still controlling the wealth of the country. The people at the very bottom have no avenue to grow and develop except to go overseas and work as foreign workers.

In India, it’s quite amazing to see members of untouchable castes, like Mahendra Yadav, become the chief economist of the Reserve Bank of India. The only thing his ancestors were allowed to do was sweep the streets. India’s capacity to get rid of the feudal mindset, is liberating enormous reserves of energy within the Indian body politic, and also ensures that the brain power found among the lower castes, is now being used to develop the country. So, in the same way, Southeast Asian societies must get rid of this feudal mentality and see the lower classes not as liabilities to their societies

but as assets.

Is it possible to attain an equilibrium between traditional values and modernity?

You can preserve noble values of the past, but they should be subject to re-evaluation all the time. Take, for example, family values. It is a great strength of Asian societies that they pay such a high premium on taking care of their families, which explains why many Asian societies are able to provide – in a sense – an inherent social safety net. So, that’s positive. But the other side of family values is the danger of nepotism. That’s why I think the fundamental principle that all Asian societies should implement is the principle of meritocracy.

Not too many countries have reached that stage yet.

Surprisingly, there’s China. The country is still run by the Chinese communist party. But China today has one of the youngest set of leaders of any country in the world. And China believes that unless you have a process of renewal of the leadership, China will go downhill again.

China and India are growing rapidly, and Japan is developed. But some other economies are at different levels of development. Will they be left behind?

Some countries like North Korea will clearly lag behind. I also worry for Myanmar. But the good news is that enough Asian societies have succeeded: Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore – the four tigers. Now China and India are succeeding. So, there’s enough momentum and what we encourage, especially at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, where students come from all over Asia, is to study what the successful countries are doing. This is what China did in the early years. It asked itself the obvious question: why are the Chinese in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore doing so well, when the Chinese in Chi-

na are so poor? They implemented free market economics. So China did too. The Chinese have bit the bullet and they are prepared to get rid of state monopolies, get rid of inefficient state enterprises.

ASEAN talks about establishing an East Asian Community. Can that bring some kind of balance between the different levels of economies?

I'm actually very bullish about the East Asian Community. More and more Asian countries are recognizing that the only way Asia can develop is to grow peacefully together. We realize in some ways, that the west has reached the greatest peak of human civilization, not just achieved zero wars between any two western states. They have reached zero prospect of war. This explains why these societies develop, grow and succeed. In the same way, the Asian societies have gone one step towards that direction, by achieving zero war. That's a remarkable achievement. And I don't think this happened by accident. I think it's the result of a conscious decision on the part of Asian leaders. If they go to war with each other, they will waste another century trying to catch up with the West.

China is growing rapidly. Should other Asian countries feel threatened by this?

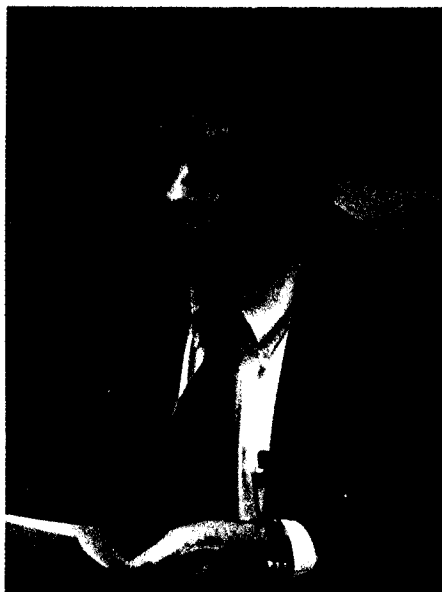
I think they should be concerned by the rise of China. The good news is that the Chinese government is aware that many of its neighbors are worried. And so the Chinese government has made a strong and profound effort to share its prosperity with its neighbors. The fastest growing trade flows in the world today are between China and its neighbors.

India is not far behind China. Do you see a new regional-political alliance shaping up?

I think the rise of India is very good news for this region. China was providing one engine of growth, and now India provides another. These two big engines of growth will carry Asia with them. Historically, Southeast Asia has been the meeting point of Indian and Chinese civilizations. The underlying cultural fabric of this region shows how traditional linkages between these societies go back 2000 years. These links were cut off by the European colonial period for 200 years or so. Now they're being restored and with the growing awareness of our own common cultural origins, we can bring our societies closer and enable economic cooperation to take place. So I see the rise of India as a plus for the region, together with the rise of China.

How do you see Singapore's future, with Malaysia and Indonesia as close neighbors?

They say geography is destiny. So, I



Kishore Mahbubani.

think Singapore has vested interest in the prosperity of Malaysia and Indonesia. But it is also a fact that Singapore has a troubled relationship with Malaysia. And even with Indonesia, recently regarding the haze, we also see difficulties. Singapore's challenge is to convince both Malaysia and Indonesia that Singapore's success is only going to benefit them. In economic terms, access to markets, through Singapore as a very efficient, logistical hub, creates enormous opportunities for Malaysian and Indonesian industries to connect with the rest of the world. It's not a zero sum game. Singapore's success does not come at the cost of its neighbors, but actually adds economic value for its neighbors.

In other words, there's a kind of symbiotic relationship between the three countries?

Very much so. This goes back to my question whether Asians can think. If you took away the political considerations, if you took away the politicians from the exercise, there is no doubt that if you did it on purely economic considerations, there could be tremendous synergy between the three countries. And if we want to compete against China and India, we cannot do it on our own because they have far bigger domestic markets. This zero sum mentality reflects a 19th century worldview, which is sad and tragic. In fact, so little has been done to really connect these three countries. If we were able to get a change of mindset among the economic planners of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, we can be the leading edge of the growth of Southeast Asia. Instead, Vietnam is taking off on its own. It's an amazing paradox of

history that while Asian countries were taking off, Vietnam was far behind. Today, Vietnam is racing far ahead of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.

Terrorism is a scourge in Asia. How should this problem be addressed?

I think it needs to be addressed at two levels. First, you need to fight terrorism because terrorists do not believe in compromise. If there is a terrorist threat, we must suppress it and combat it. That military dimension has to be done. The other part is to ensure that terrorist organizations do not get new recruits. We should find out the underlying causes that lead people to join these terrorist organizations and deprive them of that. To stop these movements from growing we also have to address other issues, like taking care of political problems that fuel these movements.

You have done two books, what is your next project?

My next book is on the rise of Asia. I am now convinced that the 21st century may be the Asian century. So, I want to explain why Asia is now succeeding. I hope to finish the book sometime in 2007, because there is a tremendous amount of global interest today on the rise of Asia.

Do you have a title—as provocative as your previous book?

I'm playing around with two titles. One is 'The Greatest Asian Century.' As you know, in the history of Asia, different parts of Asia have succeeded at different times. There was no one time when all of them succeeded. So, now you have Northeast Asia - South Korea, Japan and now China, succeeding, followed by many Southeast Asian countries and India succeeding. We have this huge arc of prosperity in Asia. So I call this the greatest Asian century ever in the history of our times. The other title I'm thinking about is 'The Return of History,' to balance Francis Fukuyama's essay *The End of History*, where he says that we would become carbon copies or replicas of the West. That's not going to happen. I foresee a great Asian cultural renaissance, in the next 10 to 20 years.

You have traveled widely. Where is the ideal place for you to settle down?

I think the ideal place is Singapore, and I say this not out of political correctness but out of a genuine conviction that by 2050, three of the world's four largest economies will be in Asia: Japan, China and India. This region will be the center of world history. And if you sit in Singapore or in Southeast Asia, you will get a ringside view of the action. The theater is coming here. So why move when history is coming towards us?