



A SHORT HISTORY OF

ASIA

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Introduction

Western attitudes towards Asia are frequently bedevilled by inaccurate perceptions, even at the most fundamental levels. Many Westerners still hold views coloured by the opinions of the colonial period, with assumptions of white supremacy, and vague, shocking concepts like the well at Cawnpore and 'the black hole of Calcutta.' Others visualise a picture of 'Asian tigers', vast communities almost magically transforming themselves into clones of Western consumerist societies, or equally mysteriously, visited by economic catastrophe. These Asian people sometimes say and do things which seem not to make sense. This, like anything else not understood, prompts uneasiness.

Most inappropriate of all is to visualise 'Asia' as a homogeneous unit, when in fact it is a term of convenience embracing widely-varying peoples and cultures. But it is also necessary to recognise a certain commonality of problems, of social and economic attitudes which is increasingly coming to overlay that variety. Many of these 'Third World' problems – underdevelopment, extreme poverty, ugly and unhealthy urbanisation, difficulties of government, internal civil war, over-population among them, can be traced back to the colonial era.

Hence a proper understanding of the Asian region demands some knowledge of its cultures and history, including a realistic

assessment of the colonial phase. There is a certain urgency about this because of the growing importance of the Asian nations in the world economy and political balance of power. For instance, China may well become one of the world's largest economies early in the third millennium. China will probably lead a loose zonal union of developing nations in Asia which were former colonies of European, Japanese and American imperialists into enhanced power and world status, in spite of – and possibly because of – the region's economic downturn of 1997. Pan-Asian economic co-operation must increase, if only because of perceived responsibility of the Western economic system for the Asian crisis. For this reason and for others this zonal group is already beginning to see itself as an entity with common interests – and this need do nothing to diminish its variety and the individuality of its component peoples.

The Asian nations have shouldered their way into virtually every area of modern technology, they typically have an active and able middle-class, at least four have nuclear weapons or the means to make them, and they influence regions outside Asia, like Africa and the Middle East. The products of their industry now feature prominently in the lives of almost every Westerner.

This new power bloc must increasingly affect, and even challenge, the rest of the world. A reported statement of the then Chinese Premier, Li Peng, in August, 1997 is relevant. It attacked 'the Western world order', supported a call from Indonesia for a review of the UN Human Rights Charter to place less stress on individual rights, and promised Chinese support to an east Asian economic union.

China's growth has been due substantially to a remarkable reversion to private enterprise in recent decades. That transition has been driven by powerful motivations, themselves rooted millennia-deep in the traditions of the past: Hard work, familial connections, respect for learning, a distancing between business and government, a passion for money and material success, acceptance of authoritarian government are among