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Old news and views recycled

iewed by Chong Seck Chim  
ASIAN VALUES WESTERN DREAMS  
Understanding the New Asia  
By Greg Sheridan  
(Allen & Unwin, 326 pages)

THIS book provides yet another background read to what has sometimes been called the "Asian Millennium". Earlier, Greg Sheridan had written *Tigers, Leaders of the New Asia-Pacific* dealing with personalities, not countries. His theme now is Asian values, an elusive subject preoccupying statesmen and academics alike in an ongoing debate.

Sheridan says that he had written his book to ask "a simple question: How do Asian societies reconcile their desire to celebrate their distinctive local cultures with the overwhelming forces of globalisation?"

Not so simple as it turns out, for he himself does not provide a straight answer.

The subject is ramified, and one gets the impression sometimes that all has been grist to the mill for the author, specially in the chapters on individual countries.

After all, history and politics, philosophy and economics and even genetics and ethics are all tied up in a discussion of culture and ideology. Sheridan has travelled widely in the countries he writes about, picking the brains of people he met, not all of them bigwigs, whose remarks add some spice to a careworn topic.

For the "values" had always been there; they are only newsworthy now in light of the remarkable spurt to economic prominence of the Asian Tigers, old and new, in recent decades.

As well also, as a *raison d'etre* or otherwise of the Asian Crisis, which happily now seems well behind us. As a matter of fact, at the time of the Song Dynasty, China had led the world, and even Angkor Wat was said to be way ahead of Europe as a centre of learning. Then came a hiatus and the West shot ahead, colonised and took control of the world economies.

The book does not deal with this contrariety. But it amply demonstrates that there are broadly the Eastern and Western camps, each with its own perception of what these values or precepts are worth. For the West, perturbed by the often double-digit growth of the new Asian economies, it was necessary both to try to learn a lesson as well as to reassure themselves. Some would say, also throw a spanner in the works.

For the Asians, many of them still smarting from a colonial hangover, the temptation to gloat over the discomfiture of the former *tuan besar*, taking pride also in their own accomplishments, was too hard to resist. The Japan that Can Say No, written by the mayor of Tokyo, and our own slogan of Malaysia Boleh! are symptoms of this reaction.

As it is, many Western analysts have attributed "too much of the idea of Asian values to just two leaders, namely Lee Kuan Yew and Dr Mahathir ... (they also) seem to hold the peculiarly strange and contradictory notion that Asian values do not exist and yet, while not existing, caused the economic crisis".

Gunnar Myrdal had years ago in his *Asian Drama - An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations* distinguished between what he called the hard societies in the Sinic ("chopsticks") civilisations of East Asia and the soft societies of South and Southeast Asia, whose "expectations and desire for achievement are lower".

That was in 1938. Sixty years on, both India and Southeast Asia are also joining the ranks of the high-flyers. (Sheridan has rather nimbly fashioned his own definition: "The Asian values debate has so far mainly concerned East Asia, by which I mean North-East Asia and South-East Asia.")

A more recent book has raised even more hackles. Samuel Huntington in his Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order "saw both Confucian cultures and the Japanese culture as inherently in competition with the West, led naturally by the United States ... The West has the best and most humane values, he argues, but the Rest (Asia, Africa, etc), because of their ineradicable cultural limitations, just aren't capable of implementing such values in their own societies."

Predictably, "human rights" has become the bete noire in international face-offs between the West and the Rest. Confucius and his teachings were said to be used to justify East Asian authoritarianism.

But the mat sallehs can also thumb a nose at themselves sometimes, as witness this entry in the millennium log of The Economist: "The future United States in 1776 declared itself independent of Britain, and all men created equal; and stuck to slavery until 1865".

A recent statement by the UN Secretary-General that "State sovereignty, in its most basic sense, is being redefined by the forces of globalisation and international co-operation" is just as equivocal.

The Far Eastern Economic Review (Oct 21, 1999) reporting this recalled that it was Nato's contention earlier that "it had been necessary to violate Yugoslavia's sovereignty to protect the human rights of the Albanian minority". No wonder the smaller countries of the world, particularly the ex-colonies, are wary of ever more noble calls for human rights, globalisation and other platitudes, often charged with double standards "damaging to their health".

The controversy, if not confrontation, will probably go on, with further expository books to come. Sheridan's is a fair enough review of the evidence, and it is surprising that there is no Asian figuring in the usual patter in the blurb. So it has been left to outsiders to applaud the work.

I myself think that much of the book, inevitably, is a recycling of old news and views.

The Confucian Analects are endlessly reinterpreted: the sage must have turned over in his grave several times over because of the liberties taken in his name.

And anyway, are so many of his tenets still applicable any more? Family solidarity, filial piety, clan loyalties, including fealty to the ruler and other virtues of a bygone age are now mostly a fond memory.

An aggrieved old-timer told me, "I visited my newly-wed son overseas and my in-law treated me like an outlaw."

And recently, a quarter of Chinese youngsters in a small sociological survey in Singapore said they preferred to be Japanese or Caucasian. The Sin Chew Jit Poh, a Chinese newspaper in Malaysia, has just announced similar results: 11.7 per cent of their youngsters (aged below 35) made the same choice.

Yet Sheridan says that Asian values are alive and well. Amidst this plethora of views, both amateur and expert, it is not too easy to do a summing-up. A former South Korean Foreign Minister tried his hand:

"Western civilisation stressing the pre-eminence of the individual is encountering Sinic civilisation emphasising social harmony."

While deploring such "epigrammatic civilisational summaries ... of limited utility", Sheridan himself has not been too helpful with this rhetorical excess:

"Asian values are much more than political values. The Asian values debate is alive and well. Asian values themselves are alive and well. ... It is a great adventure, a journey of the human spirit, an aspiration for cultural renewal and social integration, a debate the more challenging because it is without definitional straitjackets. And it has only just begun."

Look out for a new book from him soon.

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