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Will this century belong to Asia?

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OF interest in these days of so much talk about globalisation are other views held by more understanding Western observers. One such is as expressed in *Asian Values, Western Dreams: Understanding the New Asia* by Greg Sheridan, foreign editor of *The Australian*.

We remember that in the old days there was Kipling's dictum: East in East, West is West. Ne'er the twain shall meet.

In the 1990s was born the debate on Asian values versus Western values. As *The Straits Times* in Singapore put it recently "Malaysia's Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew led the charge" for Asian values.

In the circumstances, Sheridan's book has been given publicity in the island republic. Quoted was his assessment of Singapore: "Of course, there are limitations in Singapore on the Opposition and it is not a liberal democracy in the accepted Western sense. Nonetheless, its democracy is real, it is not a sham."

Meriting mention was Sheridan's comments in an interview on examples of what was described as Western high-handedness. One example is the *New York Times* newspaper: "You never see someone from the *New York Times* in Asia, but you get all kinds of editorials which are written as if they know exactly what they're talking about, as if they're talking about Minnesota. Getting off Manhattan at all is a major achievement for them."

To which we might add that the paper has not editorialised on the East Side in Manhattan where the poor New Yorkers live or on Harlem, the black ghetto.

Another example mentioned by Sheridan was Chris Patten, the last British Governor of Hong Kong: "On his own admission, he doesn't know a thing about Asia, he's never been to Taiwan, he's never been to China. But on the basis of being Governor of Hong Kong for a couple of years, he then pronounced on the whole continent of Asia as though he were a great sort of lifelong Asian scholar."

Adding fuel to the debate was the financial crisis in Asia in 1997 leaving millions out of work in Indonesia, Thailand and thousands more in South Korea. There was no talk about Western values over what were done by Long-Term Management Capital led by John Meriwether, Wall Street's celebrated trader who also recruited Nobel Laureates Merton Miller and Myron Scholes.

The hedge funds established by LTMC and by George Soros were such that they could influence the direction of a nation's currency. As has been disclosed, they operate in secrecy and there are few regulations to control their activities. We do well to ask: What price Western values when Asia is the target? Do we get a lot of blarney?

They help to explain why former Philippine President Fidel Ramos called for the "Asianisation of Asia" when he spoke in a "Message from Asia" symposium in Japan about a year later.

Quote: "Without shutting out the enlightening aspects of outside influence, we must carry out a campaign among Asians to feel Asian. We must nurture the Asian consciousness to make our peoples feel and realise that they are part of the regional community."

On the same wave-length was former Japanese ambassador to Vietnam, Kazuo Ogura, who touched on the need for a united Asia, along with Western Europe, "to be prepared to check America so as to ensure that its

leadership is free from self-righteousness and prejudice and that it does not lapse into protectionism and a narrow egoism".

Emphasised was the point that America, for its part, should stop obstructing Asian countries' attempts to get together and exchange views among themselves.

An example of it was opposition to the East Asia Economic Caucus which had been proposed by Malaysia. So it was that Ogura noted the sense of anger and frustration over Asia's "lack of mechanism for consultation and swift response to the (financial) crisis". Added to this is Asia's weak voice in institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Posed late last year by Professor Paul Kennedy from Yale University was the question: Will the next century be America's?

Author of many works, including *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* and *Preparing for the 21st Century*, he is confident that the 21st Century will be America's even as the 16th century was Spain's, the 18th century France's and the 19th Britain's.

In his view the US enters the 21st century as the world's Number One power. He adds: "...it is possible that the US could stay at the top for many years to come. Yet it is wise to recall Voltaire's question: If Rome and Carthage fell, which Power is the immortal? And his answer was None."

And so we ourselves ask: Could not the new century be Asia's?

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