

THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE NEW ZEALAND ASIA INSTITUTE
UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND, 28 MARCH 1996

First of all, please let me thank the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Auckland for inviting me to speak before you today and to officially open The New Zealand Asia Institute. I take it that the establishment of this Institute and the founding of the Chair of Malay Studies in the University of Victoria, Wellington signify a desire to know more about Asia and the need on the part of New Zealand and the New Zealanders to relate to their northern neighbours. This is a welcome change for New Zealand cannot always regard itself as a part of Europe, a distant outpost of Europe. In the past, New Zealanders bypassed Asia on their way to Europe, Britain in particular. Trade was also with Europe for Asians preferred cotton to the wool that you produce, eat rice rather than wheat, ghee rather than butter and cheese. Asian industries were in their infancy and did not need the raw materials you produce. Migration and settlement by Asians were often forbidden.

2. But the past have now passed. Market configurations and trade patterns have changed. Europe now produced all the food it used to import from the Antipodes. Politically it has ceased to consider ethnicity as a basis for distant relationship. Geographical proximity and regions have displaced historical links. Even the Commonwealth has lost its place in the British scheme of things.

3. On the other hand, Asia and in particular East Asia has emerged as a dynamic region. The people of East Asia have not only become more affluent but their ways of life have changed. They have developed a taste for butter and cheese, bread and wine, oysters and steaks. Wool in greater and lesser quantities have become the preferred material for clothing, blended with synthetic fibres of course. Their burgeoning industries need the coal and iron ore from this part of the world. And their airlines fly them for holidays in the South, where they have bought property, resorts and other businesses.

4. It is perhaps necessary for New Zealand to take note and adjust. Perceptions of Asia need to be changed and a new relationship needs to be developed. An Institute such as this should serve a useful purpose and should help in enlightening New Zealand about Asia and bring New Zealanders and Asians together in a more congenial atmosphere. We believe that New Zealanders should find no difficulty in adjusting. The culture of New Zealanders should facilitate this, for New Zealanders are naturally friendly and hospitable. Although the Maoris may have very good reasons not to be happy with their lot, but at least they are still around. In some countries indigenous

people have been wiped out, deliberately or otherwise by the new settlers. It is a measure of the tolerance of New Zealanders that there are Maoris today to demand their rights and indeed to be accorded some of this.

5. It should therefore be easy for New Zealanders to adjust to the new realities about Asia.

6. Asia of course is not homogenous as Europe is homogenous. Asians are Asians not because of ethnicity but because they belong to a geographical entity. Otherwise they differ from each other greatly; differ by colour, culture, history, religion, language and many other features. Yet despite being very different they seem to be classifiable as Asians. Perhaps it is the Europeans who group them together. But they do feel a vague sense of unity, and they can easily identify with each other especially in the presence of Europeans.

7. Historical evidence shows that the earliest civilisations were found in Asia. Certainly European civilisation owes much to the spread of Christianity, one of the three major monotheistic religions originating in Asia. The Mediterranean civilisation may antedate Christianity but when Asia already had many civilised communities, Europe was still very primitive.

8. Looking back to past glories does not justify the present need to be respected and to be treated as equals. But the importance of past achievements lies in the fact that they can be replicated. If Asia was a greater civilisation than Europe once was, can it not be as advanced as Europe now? There is nothing inherently inferior in the Asians as there is nothing inherently superior in Europeans.

9. History is full of empires which emerge almost out of nowhere, bloom and expanded to greatness and then faded away. And in their places new empires and great nations moved in. For a while they seemed destined to last forever. But then they too stumble, weaken and disintegrate.

10. Some factors must be at work. And these factors cannot be so mysterious that they cannot be learnt and duplicated. Provided a correct analysis is made, any country or continent can apply the lessons of the past in order to achieve greatness or at least a reasonable semblance of it.

11. Europe achieved greatness because Europeans were once prepared to work and venture forth and take risks and accept dangers. They sailed thousands of miles from their shores looking for trade. They did not set forth to build empires. But empires were thrust upon them. They found the countries

they seek to trade with weak and broken, superstitious and gullible and ready to submit. They found that to compete among European nations, trading stations had to be set up which readily expanded into substantial territories and so into empires.

12. Asian nations achieved greatness with much the same zeal, though they were less concerned about trade. They set out to spread religion and acquire territories. The Arabs, the Turks and the Mongols were also bent on conquest and loot. If they could stay, they occupied; if not they carried away the riches, the slaves and the women. They were adventurous, fearless and ruthless. And they built empires of varying durability. The Arab conquered, built great civilisations, then shrank and fragmented. Today Asian Arabs still occupy much of North Africa, the lands not of the Africans that we know today but the Mediterranean peoples including the Phoenecians, the Carthaginians and others.

13. The Persian empire ebbed and flowed, competing with Byzantium in the West and then with the Muslim Arabs. The Persians were not defeated, rather they accepted the religion of the Arabs, albeit in a different form. From then on, the contest was between religions rather than empires.

14. Then came the Turks, the nomadic peoples of Western China and Central Asia. They moved West across the Central Asian plains founding new nations as they went along. Their progress was unstoppable. Eastern Europe fell to the Ottoman Turks who had by then accepted Islam. For a long time the Ottomans came to be regarded as an Asian superpower, so powerful that Europe trembled when the Sultan of Turkey rattled his jewelled sword.

15. In Central Asia the Turks founded great nations. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Chechnya, Ingustia and others emerged, prospered through being part of the Silk Road, made scientific and cultural progress and off and on spawned empires led by great leaders such as Taimur the Lame, otherwise known as Tammerlane in the West.

16. But the greatest feat of Empire building among Asians was that of the Mongols. A primitive nomadic people divided into small tribes of herdsmen, there was nothing about the Mongols to mark them as great empire builders. But a single man, Temujin, a tribal leader emerged, fought his way to the leadership of all the Mongols, and gathering a huge armed cavalry force, speedily defeated Turks, Arabs, Persians, Russians and Eastern Europeans, to build the greatest empire in history, spreading from the Chinese Pacific shores to Moscow in the North and the Balkans in the West. Cruel and ruthless, Genghiz Khan destroyed everything that stood in his

way, killing hundreds of thousands of the people he conquered, raping and ransacking their cities for booty and for slaves.

17. But the Empire was shortlived, at least as a Mongol Empire. By the third generation of Genghiz's family, it had broken up, but not before founding great countries. China was united by Kublai Khan and remains a single nation to this day where once it was fragmented into a number of relatively independent provinces ruled by warlords. In India the Mogul Empire was founded which helped to create a single united India from the numerous principalities which formerly occupied the vast Indian sub-continent.

18. Modern Turkey also owed something to the Mongols for the Mongols too accepted Islam and integrated with the people of Turkish origin. Thus the people of Central Asia, largely Turkish seem to bear Mongol features. Many indeed look more Chinese than Indo-Europeans.

19. The Mongol Empire may have disintegrated and disappeared. Modern Mongolia is anything but the seat of an empire. But the Mongols left an indelible mark in all the countries they had conquered.

20. The question that begs to be asked is - how did a backward, nomadic Asian tribe of herdsmen achieve such greatness? The answer lies in their logistical skill. They were the forerunners of the German Panzers, the highly mobile regiments which constantly surprised their enemies. For the Mongol equivalent of the German motorised regiments were the fast cavalry, lightly armoured and agile. The heavily armoured Europeans on their armoured horses were unable to move quickly enough to escape the slash and thrust of Mongol swords. Their ability to shoot arrows while galloping at full speed; the orderly division of their army into distinct and integrated units of tens, hundreds, thousands and ten thousand with distinct lines of command, and their ability to move vast numbers of soldiers and supplies swiftly; all these contributed to their success. Yet the question remains. How did a primitive nomadic race of herdsmen develop such amazing military skills as to defeat practically everyone in their path? Such is the enigma of the Mongols. Surely anyone interested in nation building can learn something from the Mongol experience.

21. But Asia is more than just Turks and Mongols and Persians and Arabs. There is the 4000 year old civilisation of the Chinese, the Middle Kingdom, advanced in the arts and the sciences, a civilisation that knew technological advances when Europeans were still living in caves dressed in animal skins.

22. Japanese civilisation is 2600 years old and that of Korea not much younger. Even in the Malay Archipelago there was Sri Vijaya and Majapahit, to name a few of the civilisations of the brown people.

23. Why do I tell you these tales of bygone Asian empires and successes? It is because I believe that what people could do in the past, they can do again now. I would hasten to add that I don't think Asian countries would be setting out to conquer the world once again, to build empires. I don't think that China and Japan are about or should start wars of conquest in order to reestablish Asian capabilities and greatness.

24. Empires are not made this way now. Conquests and occupations are things of the past. They are destructive of your quarry or objective. Conquered, countries become burdens to the conquerors. And far too often they do not remain long as your colonies or vassals. They fight and drain your wealth. And finally they regain their independence, bitter and vengeful, demanding compensation for true and imagined brutalities.

25. The modern empires are economic, created through trade and economic relations. Quite often there is political dominance as well, although military occupation in whatever form is unlikely. And trade can only be done with prosperous countries. Helping a country to become prosperous is helping your ownself, for prosperous countries make good markets for your exports.

26. Asian countries now seek to build such empires, exclusive if they can but usually shared with others, Asians and Europeans or Americans. Asians have now found the formula for equality and a more benign imperialism. The first thing they have to do is to get their own houses in order. They must govern their countries well, caring for their peoples and striving for their support. They must provide a Government of the People through democratic means.

27. When political stability is achieved they can focus on economic development. Technology must be acquired and developed. The people must be educated and trained. They must be responsible to themselves and their communities, avoiding strife and disruptions. They must produce and they must market their products efficiently and competitively. They must achieve economic prosperity at par with the most developed nations of the world.

28. Some Asian countries will be economically more powerful than others. But they will all be prosperous, will be able to

throw away the begging bowl, the need for aid and the need to buy protection from outside powers.

29. The Asian countries are now well placed to achieve all these. For the first time all the Asian countries are independent and East Asia, including Southeast Asia is free from war. Peace seats comfortably on them and they are not idling. They are all working very hard to better themselves.

30. Unfortunately they are not all free from Western domination. Western forces are still present in their countries, though by their own consent. But the element of domination is still there in some countries. They must not do what they like. They may not even associate with countries in their neighbourhood which are not approved. They may not join any association of countries without approval.

31. But the Asian countries will soldier on. They will secure their independence and go on to achieve greater economic strength. They will eventually achieve greatness. They will once again become imperial nations, not territorially speaking but economically speaking.

32. Asia and the Asians will once again be world players. Their voices will once again be heard and respected in world affairs. They will not dominate the world but their place in the world order of things will be secured.

33. The Far East, that exotic place is no more. East Asia is in the West, West of America that is. The Eurocentric world is finished, as much as the Middle Kingdom is no more. The world is round. Any part or any point in it can be the centre; the reference point. Everyone must reorientate himself.

34. The people of the West Pacific are Asians. So when you study the Asians and Asia at the New Zealand Asia Institute, think of them as Westerners. America is in the East and Europe is the Far East. The People of Asia, the Neo-Westerners have no designs on the Eastern people. They only want to be fairly treated, respected and accepted as the equals of everyone.

35. If at this Institute you are correctly orientated and you have discarded previous misconceptions and the prejudices which went with Eurocentrism, then you will be well on the way to understanding Asians. And with that understanding you will be well-placed to deal with the new reality of a resurgent Asia. It would be good for the Asian neo-Western people; it would be good for everyone. The world would be a better place in every way.

36. I welcome the founding of the New Zealand Asia Institute and I am delighted to officially declare open this Institute.