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For a place often derided as painfully dull, Singapore has a knack for controversy. The city state also excels in making its voice heard above the din. Its outsized influence is partly due to its economic success and the speed with which that prosperity has been achieved.

Equally important, however, is the fact that its government includes several statesmen-provocateurs who relish the international spotlight and revel in their own notoriety. Chief among them, of course, is Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's famously acerbic founding father.

Not far behind is Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore's UN representative and the intellectual high priest of the Asian Values school. Mahbubani, 50, has spent much of this decade touting Asia's renaissance and serving up a withering critique of the west, the US in particular.

A career diplomat by day, he is a freelance futurist in his spare time, mulling over history's seismic shifts. Mahbubani takes the seriously long view; his crystal ball projects in increments of centuries and half-millennia. For this, he has been dubbed "an Asian Toynbee" by The Economist magazine and "the [Max] Weber of the New Confucian ethic" by the Washington Post.

Not surprisingly, he is unfazed by Asia's woes. "This is a trough; we are still on an upward trajectory." And he is as anxious as ever to tangle with critics. His latest salvo is a collection of essays and speeches oddly entitled *Can Asians Think?* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1998).

The collection takes its name from a speech Mahbubani gave two years ago in Singapore to the seventh International Conference on Thinking.

Then, as now, he was struck by a disturbing paradox: why is Asia less than the sum of its parts? Why are countries, such as India and China, capable of churning out so many great minds, yet still so backward, still so weak? To Mahbubani, the poverty and anarchy that gripped the region for most of this century reflected an intellectual failure - the inability of Asians to think en masse, to organise themselves in an effective and productive manner.

In recent years, Asia has emerged from its long slumber, but Mahbubani says the question still stands: are Asians capable of constructing civil societies and durable communities - in short, can they think?

He concedes that this is a particular definition of "thinking"; but clearly, any confusion it causes is more than offset in his mind by the shock value - and shocking fellow Asians into action is his aim.

"I am challenging them, but I wouldn't be doing so if I were not confident they could meet the challenge," he says.

Predictably, the book is also meant as a challenge to the west: is it prepared to accept an Asia that thinks and acts independently?

Mahbubani believes it has no choice. He is sticking by the claim he made during a 1993 address at his alma mater, the National University of Singapore: "We are coming to the end of a 500-year cycle of domination by western civilisation ... Banish the thought that the answers to critical global questions are to be found only in New York, London or Paris. They are equally likely to be found in Shanghai or Tokyo, Jakarta or Bombay, or perhaps even Singapore."

Don't dare accuse Mahbubani of peddling an oriental chauvinism, however. He tells me his views have been badly misrepresented by journalists like me. He says that in calling attention to drug use, divorce rates, and other signs of social decay in Europe and the US, he is neither disparaging the west nor playing down its achievements; he is merely suggesting that it should spend a little more time tending to its own house, rather than lecturing Asians on how to build theirs.

Indeed, he sees himself as something of a cultural go-between; a man proudly of the east, yet at home in the west. "As a child, I saluted the British flag and sang 'God Save the Queen'," recalls the Singapore native. "I am a child of the west; I know the western mind-set."

The "western mind-set" has been causing Mahbubani much grief of late. He says the furious reaction of the Washington-London "punditocracy" to the argument that Asians desire social stability above all else, and tend to place communal interests ahead of those of the individual, plainly indicates a nerve has been struck (how this concern for community squares with the inability to "think" as defined by Mahbubani, he doesn't explain).

While a clash of civilisations is not inevitable, he continues, the west must come to terms with the fact that Asians are not governed by the same impulses that move, say, Americans. But reaching that understanding will not be easy, he warns. "The western mind is a great mind, but it is caught in a mental box."

The biggest blind spot relates to so-called Asian values. Mahbubani maintains there are indeed such things as "Asian values" - certain political, social, and cultural mores not only common to Asia but also shared across its wide landmass.

An example? Go to any airport in Asia, he says, and one will invariably find entire clans - parents, grandparents, siblings - on hand to greet relatives or see them off. At Heathrow, by contrast, such scenes are rare, and usually involve Asians.

The point? Family ties matter more in Asia. While such politically incorrect observations have been greeted with slings and arrows in New York, says Mahbubani, they have earned him accolades at home. "From Teheran to Tokyo, people have thanked me for saying these things."

When it comes to human rights and democracy in Asia, he says the west - meaning Washington - should step aside and let economic progress fuel demand for greater freedom in all aspects of life; that, after all, is what happened in South Korea and Taiwan during the 1980s, and each is now a thriving democracy (he conveniently neglects to mention that American pressure, albeit belated, was crucial in moving both nations away from authoritarian rule).

By that logic, I ask, shouldn't Singapore, Asia's most advanced economy outside Japan, also be its most mature democracy, with free and fair elections and an unfettered political culture?

Mahbubani's smile tightens. After a very pregnant pause he replies with another transport metaphor: "We are a small canoe. If we tell everyone, 'Go ahead, behave as if you are on an aircraft carrier, jump up and down, do whatever you want,' we would have trouble. At some point, the canoe would capsize. The rules that apply when you are 4m people squeezed together on a small island must be tighter."

In other words, the Asian Way to democracy bypasses Singapore.