

**Controversial Mahbubani Book a Bestseller Here**  
**By Toh Han Shih**  
**16 March 1999**  
**Business Times Singapore**  
**© 1999 Singapore Press Holdings Limited**

A slim but controversial book by Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore's permanent representative to the United Nations, titled *Can Asians Think?*, has made a bigger impact at home and abroad than most people thought likely.

The book, published by Singapore's Times Editions in the middle of last year, made it to the bestseller lists in Singapore, has become required reading in some universities abroad, and garnered controversial, mixed reviews in several notable publications.

Shirley Hew, general manager of Times Editions, a unit of listed Times Publishing, told BT the book can be considered a bestseller as over 5,000 copies have been sold.

To people used to thinking of popular bestsellers in terms of millions of copies sold, that may not appear much. However, for a specialist book like Mr Mahbubani's - essentially a collection of essays and speeches - sales of 5,000 copies were beyond expectations.

The book, the first by the career diplomat who was permanent secretary at the foreign ministry when it was published, was on the top 10 bestseller list of Borders in Singapore last year, said a Borders executive.

Why has the book done well? Mr Mahbubani, contacted in New York, e-mailed BT: "One reason could be that many of these essays were published in leading journals (like *Foreign Affairs*). When they were collected in one volume, they appealed to those who had already read some of my articles."

The book has garnered its share of controversial reviews. One reviewer, Jim Mann, who writes for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote this caustic comment last week: "Can Asians think? Of course. But after reading this book, I wasn't too sure about Mahbubani."

But the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, in its review of the book in its Sept 17 issue, said: "Mahbubani goes on to deliver some brilliant political analysis, proving that he, at least, can think."

Minister for Law and Foreign Affairs S Jayakumar, when he launched the book last July, warmly endorsed it: "Kishore's essays in this book are original and thought-provoking. He has a special ability to break away from conventional wisdom."

The book was part of the reading list for a course on Asian Media at the University of California, according to a letter to Mr Mahbubani from Thomas Plate, director of the university's Asia Pacific Media Network.