

Asia Pacific: A View on Its Role in the New World Order

By Michael Dobbs-Higginson;
Longmans, Hong Kong. (The Japanese version is scheduled to be published soon by The Japan Times.)

Few pieces of literature on Asia could parallel the panoramic exhaustiveness of *Asia Pacific*. This encyclopedic volume on the region covers all the principal players, and deals with the issue of a regional forum in the new world order which is now taking place. *Asia Pacific*, though actually written in five years, is the work of Michael Dobbs-Higginson's dramatic life history stretching more than 30 years in this part of the world.

Dobbs-Higginson's first Asian encounter came at a small Buddhist temple in Kyoto for spartan wintry discipline. He then extensively traveled throughout Asia, engaging in a variety of venture businesses and odd jobs. Later, he became an investment banker to head Merrill Lynch Asia Pacific as chairman. Now he is pursuing scores of his own interests in the region, including serving as an advisor to an Asian government ministry.

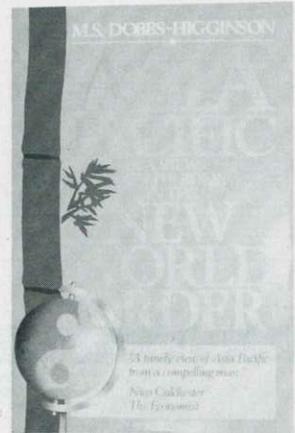
Besides an overall perspective, *Asia Pacific* provides an in-depth and insightful country-by-country analysis in non-academic, forthright language. The book's central theme is to the point: The East-West security axis during the Cold War is now replaced with a North (the West)-South (primarily composed of Asia) economic axis. Such a tectonic shift on the world scene leads to a multi-polar leadership in which power is shared by the world's leading economic powers on a pragmatic, business-like basis rather than on an ideological one. In a trade-driven world, Asia must become a cohesive economic entity to secure and further promote its prosperity.

In reference to Japan, Dobbs-Higginson deals with four main topics, namely, unique characteristics of Japanese society, a brief historical perspective of the nation, the so-called Japan problem, and emerging

changes. To begin, Japan is portrayed as deceptively dissimilar to the rest of the world, for despite all those modern trappings such as shining office buildings and fancy boutiques, Japan remains distinctly Japanese as it was 400 or even 1,000 years ago. He argues the Japanese innate affinity with nature and submission to the group distance the concept of guilt and individual morality that is universally accepted the world over. "Too many Japanese do not experience guilt because they do not believe in fairness, even as an ideal. ... In nature there is only survival and balance." This would probably mean the botanical passivity of the Japanese has yet established a core belief system that transcends all secular circumstances such as vagaries of nature and the need for group cohesion.

Further, it is stated that the Japanese sense no guilt or shame unless they stir up the opprobrium of the group they belong to. According to his observation, our moral standard is like a moving target, varying from one context to another, and from one situation to another. "With such different frames of reference, it is almost impossible for Westerners, and even the people of the rest of Asia Pacific, to assess Japan on common ground."

It may be true that Japan is run by a different set of rules as the author emphasizes, but I still think this is a typical overstatement, and there is little convincing evidence that Japanese are individually so amoral and ethically apathetic. Contrary to Karel van Wolferen, an outspoken revisionist critic of Japan, however, Dobbs-Higginson stresses the futility of scathing how differently Japan works from the Western viewpoint, and rather calls for a mutual understanding to bridge the gap between the Japanese and non-Japanese. He then employs a dichotomy by saying, "In short, while the rest of the world (the West and the East included) is largely populated by groups of bickering individualistic monkeys doing their own thing and often paying no more than lip service to the concept of good of the community or nationhood, Japan is a gigantic, rich and frighteningly efficient ant colony." Further, the author



elaborates on his idea that the ant-like Japanese society is structured on the basis of hierarchy, the subordination of individual desires, and an absolute commitment to collective goals, even to the point of death.

I agree with Dobbs-Higginson when he says "Change is not an option [for Japan], it is a necessity." As demonstrated in Cambodia, Japan's diplomatic leadership in the international arena is increasingly recognized, and the label of diplomatic pygmy no longer sticks. Similarly, the nation's active participation in tackling the refugee problem is another milestone as Ogata Sadako leads the U.N. team to improve the situation in many trouble spots of the world. Japanese international contributions are thus becoming more multi-dimensional from the erstwhile lopsided emphasis on economic aid in which the nation ranks first.

Moreover, the domestic market is fast accommodating a large number of new entries from abroad. Perhaps albeit a bit too slowly to those watching from overseas, changes are certainly coming to affect almost every fabric of the Japanese society. In the epilogue of his book, the author concludes that "Perhaps what we need to look for in the future is a kind of man—not a monkey, as in the selfish Western model, nor an ant, as the faceless Japanese model, but a combination of the two."

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