The Rise and Decline of the Asian Century
False Starts on the Path to the Global Millennium

By Christopher Lingle

Revised third edition

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310 PAGES + INDEX

This book is a comprehensive rebuttal of those who proclaim a coming “Asian Century,” in which East Asia will replace the United States as the center of the world economy. Christopher Lingle’s prescience, ironically, makes his book less valuable in the classroom than it otherwise might have been. A few years ago this book might have served as a welcome burst of contrariness against all the tomes proclaiming the East Asian economic miracle. Today, however, amidst the East Asian economic crisis, this book’s assertions seem passé: the dragon Lingle seeks to slay is already gravely wounded if not dead.

Lingle examines in his book’s opening chapters the concept of a coming “Asian Century”; he then turns to an exploration of whether there really is a distinctive model of East Asian development. His fourth chapter, “Economic realities and Asian illusions,” discusses whether past economic growth in East Asia can continue into the future, with Lingle answering in the negative; his fifth chapter examines China’s economy. Subsequent chapters explore “Asian values,” “Asian democracy,” and media freedom and its lack in East Asia; geopolitics in the Asian region, including ASEAN and its future, and the threat posed by a resurgent China; the environmental costs of East Asia’s economic development; and the reputed decline of the West. The tenth and last chapter summarizes the book’s argument that the “East Asian model” of development is fatally flawed, and indeed, a fiction. There are two additional chapters in the third edition of the book: in one, Lingle offers an overly pessimistic view of Hong Kong since its handover, and in the other he discusses the Asian economic crisis in its initial months up to February 1998.

I found this book difficult to get through. Lingle presents his arguments in what seems to me to be an overly Manichean way: “East Asia is rotten!” is the only conclusion one can draw from the book, with the United States and “the West” the model against which East Asia is judged and found wanting. Lingle is the academic who was forced to flee Singapore to avoid being unjustly sued after writing a newspaper article critical of Singapore’s leaders; he thus has earned his right to feel outraged by the self-promotion by some Asian leaders as to the glories of the coming “Asian Century.” However, East Asian leaders aren’t the only people in the world who are self-righteous. Given the taken-for-granted
ethnocentrism of many American students, I would feel reluctant to use this book in an American classroom, for fear that it would only confirm some students’ underlying sense that “the American way is best”—the issue is of course far more complex than this, even in purely economic terms, the central language of Lingle’s argument. Students in Singapore would benefit from reading this book, but students in the United States, many of whom may be only dimly aware of the earlier proclamations of the coming “Asian Century” emanating from Singapore and Malaysia, perhaps would not.

In my own class in Hong Kong on “Culture and Business,” I will use Mahathir Mohamad’s and Ishihara Shintaro’s The Voice of Asia and Chris Patten’s East and West—two utterly opposing books, with the latter similar in argument to Lingle’s book, but more compelling reading—to have my students debate the question of “Asian values,” and will use Lingle’s book, with its often valuable economic explications, as my own reference. A good scholarly book explicating the East Asian economic crisis is sorely needed for the college classroom; perhaps Lingle, with a lighter, more detached touch, is the person to write such a book.

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The year 2000 is the Chinese year of dragon, and our Spring issue of Education About Asia in the year 2000 will be a thematic issue on Teaching about Asian Economies.