Hermann Hesse **in Singapore**

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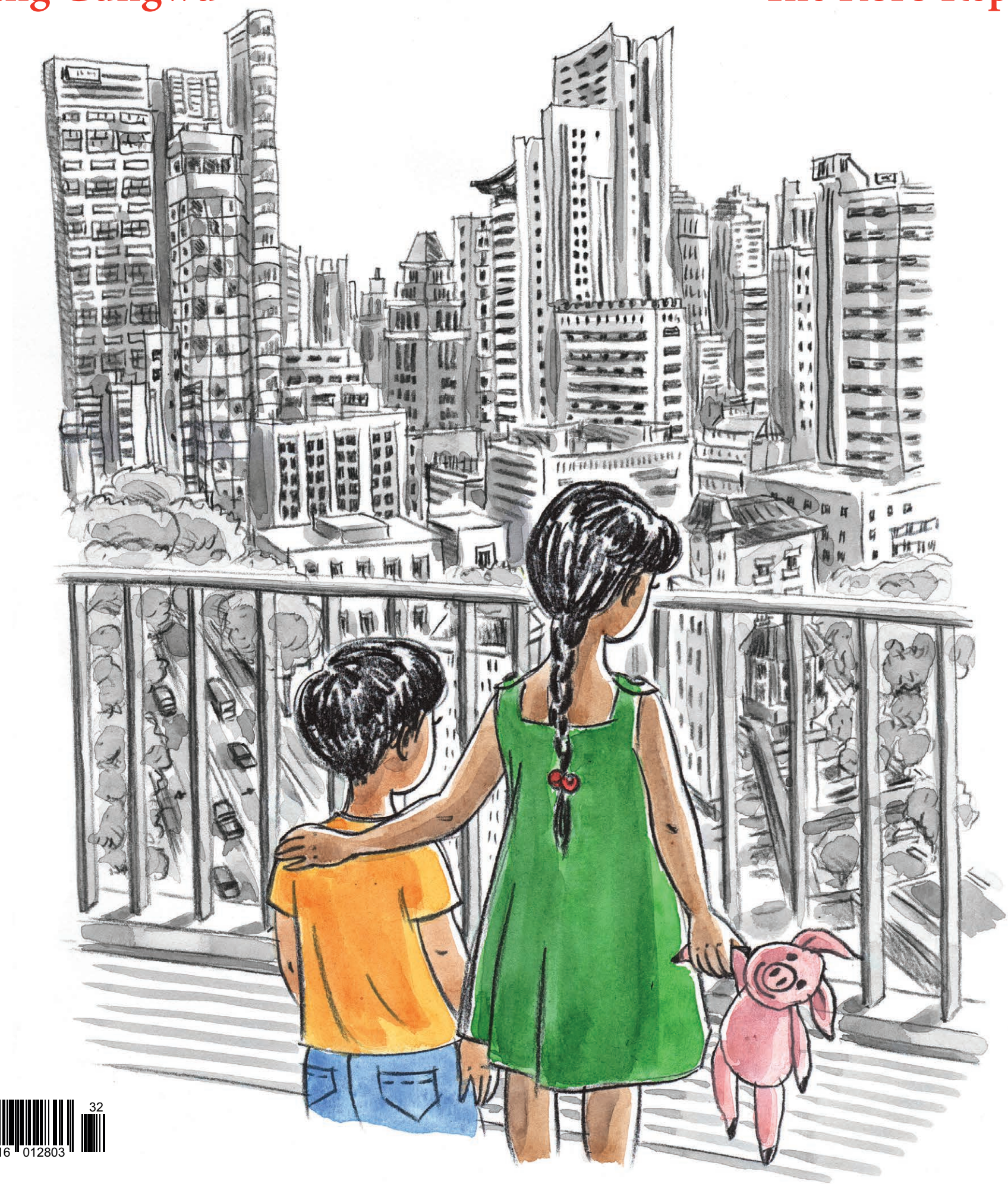

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Big on Asia

Kirsten Han



Parag Khanna in Ulanbaatar, Mongolia, after completing a charity rally, 2010

Parag Khanna doesn't shy away from big statements. Case in point: one of his previous books, published eight years ago, is titled *How to Run the World: Charting a Course to the Next Renaissance*. Now the global strategy adviser is back with a new book, *The Future Is Asian: Commerce, Conflict, and Culture in the 21st Century*. In it, Khanna argues that the world is being "irreversibly Asianised", with economic growth and rapid development pushing the mega-region to a prominence that not only sidesteps, but challenges American and European dominance. The book is described on Khanna's website as "the definitive guide" to this new reality.

But while the future might be Asian, many of Khanna's roots are in the West. Born in India, he was raised in the United Arab Emirates, the United States and Germany. He has degrees from Georgetown and a PhD in international relations from the London School of Economics. Now forty-one, he's the managing partner of FutureMap, a strategic advisory firm he founded that advises national, provincial and city governments.

His work has also been well received in the West, earning him spots on *Wired* magazine's Smart List and Esquire's list of the "75 Most Influential People of the 21st Century". (That said, the reception hasn't been uniformly complimentary; in 2011, he made the *New Republic*'s list of "Over-Rated Thinkers".)

We meet at the Fullerton Bay Hotel, a sleek, climate-controlled establishment occupying premium real estate by the water at the end of Singapore's central business district. It's one of Khanna's regular haunts; he says the hotel's cafe is the closest thing he has to an office.

With a perfect view across the water to the tourist icon Marina Bay Sands, the hotel is in the best spot to show off the modernity and opulence of the island nation. Far from the migrant-worker dormitories and public housing blocks that might temper impressions of immense privilege and wealth, the glass-and-steel skyscrapers here form the city's dazzling skyline and provide the perfect visuals for Singapore's international public-relations offensive. From this vantage point, Singapore is the postcard-perfect Asian miracle poised for a bright future, an enviable foil to turbulence and upheaval elsewhere in the world.

Singapore has been a long-time practitioner of technocratic governance. Its first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, actively preached "Asian values", a political ideology prominent in the 1990s that emphasised collectivism and subordinating individual freedoms to social stability and prosperity. Singaporeans were told that curbs on civil liberties like free speech and freedom of assembly were necessary for development, and that liberal democracy was a "Western concept".

The popularity of the Asian-values ideology fell after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, but Singapore has managed to establish itself as a modern, First World metropolis, a hub of business and finance in the region. It's proud of its own success, and not afraid to let people know it; government officials often describe the country as "exceptional", "special" or "a global city". Khanna agrees, describing the city state, his home since 2012, in *The Future is Asian* as the "capital of Asia".

The capital of Asia — why do you give Singapore this distinction?

In a sense it's just a reality. It began with Singapore becoming the wealthiest, most developed and most modern country in Asia. It's the conduit for most of the foreign investment that comes into the region. It has very good relations with China, but also with the United States and India, and all countries in the world. It's diplomatically neutral, while also practising what I call multi-alignment. It's not neutral in the sense of not having strong relations with anyone; it tries to have strong relations with everyone, and to be neutral and balanced among them.

So Singapore's in an active multi-alignment, while also being a neutral venue in the way that it was for the Trump-Kim summit and for ASEAN summits, Asian summits and so forth. Singapore has moved from being sort of an accidental capital of Asia, because of the trading role of the Strait of Malacca, to being an active capital of Asia, because it's inviting everyone to come and do business here and conduct diplomacy here.

When I say capital of Asia I mean these measurable things, and less the kind of politically sensitive claims that "we're the capital, because we're better". Because Singaporeans don't say that. No Singaporean government official can ever use the phrase "Singapore is the capital of Asia".

People admire Singapore. They admire how it's run; they think of it as a reliable centre of politics and diplomacy. Objectively, you could say that to be a capital a place has to be trusted. And everyone trusts Singapore.

Growing up, you had the opportunity to live in different countries and to attend prestigious schools in the West. How do you think that has affected your outlook and your work?

I guess there are many dimensions of my Europeanisation and Americanisation. This book is about Asianisation, but my first step out of Asia, including growing up in India and the Middle East — which I call West Asia — was into the United States. Once you've become American, you're always American; you carry it with you for the rest of your life. Especially now, as we diss everything else in America, the one thing that's left is the higher education system. Going to Georgetown, working at the Council on Foreign Relations, in the academic policy community — it forces you to be your best intellectually, to be logical and sharp when you're thinking. Other places don't challenge you in that way.

I went to high school in Germany and that, to me, opened up a whole other way of thinking about what a successful society and country looks like, because Germany is a more egalitarian place with a higher quality of life than America. And it is rooted in intellectual traditions that are of course different. And that still has a big impact on me. My wife would say I'm more German than Indian! In Germany, I'm treated like a German. I belong there, in many ways.

Those two layers of my identity have had a big impact on my world view, but I haven't lost touch with being Asian. And for me, the Asian (meaning the Indian) that I was and the Asian (meaning the pan-Asian) that I feel myself today to be are from two different Asias. I feel like more of a pan-Asian now, because I live in Singapore.

When did you conclude that the future is Asian?

In no living person's memory has Asia been a viable system. And I use the word "system" rather than just "region". It has a definition: in international-relations theory it's when the parts, the units, have more to do with each other than they do with the rest of the world. But Asian countries were a system before Magellan reached the Pacific Ocean and European colonies established their bridgeheads. The Silk Road itself is an expression, a reminder of that. Asians had more to do with each other — from West Asia, from the Arab countries, to East Asia, to Japan — than with the rest of the world. That system is back, and I've measured it.

Once I started to measure it, I realised that no one has written about the Asian system, because it hasn't existed for 500 years. The post-Cold War environment has given



Crispian Chan

us now almost thirty years for the system to rebuild itself. It's happening. The system is more than just China. In the last thirty years, every book about Asia has been a book about China, not about Asia, and the system now includes in its parameters the actual geography of Asia to its full extent, which means West Asia — what we call the Middle East. The Gulf countries are a part of Asia, but they haven't been considered part of Asia for several hundred years. All those things coming together at the same time is what constitutes this new Asia.

What would you say are the new Asian values?

The first, the most obvious, is mixed capitalism. Asians have always been comfortable with state support for economies, subsidising leading sectors, picking winners — the oxymoron of "managed innovation". You can't say "managed innovation" in Silicon Valley, but here, in Singapore, it's completely normal, because our government's share of GDP is high and because governments in Asia tend to think long-term. Asians are perfectly comfortable with mixed capitalism, and there's a strong role for the private sector in providing public goods.

The second is technocratic governance. The executive branches are powerful, and often have a long shelf life — sometimes too long — but they are entrusted with delivering order and welfare, with having the best interests of society at heart. They are, to a greater or lesser degree, utilitarian in their outlook. It's trust in technocracy, if you will. And that doesn't mean elite rule; it means educated, meritocratic and utilitarian rule. No society's perfect, but these are values. These are virtues. These are things we aspire to. I don't see American society aspiring to them.

The third is social conservatism. I'm for liberal reforms in society — for LGBT rights, for a free press, for all those liberal virtues. But the path by which you achieve them, and the extent to which you still govern and regulate them, matters. America has free speech, with limitations. Singapore obviously has stricter restrictions on free speech, but I'm looking at it from a certain standpoint: of course you want to have full access to everything on the internet, but does that mean the right to spread fake news or have foreign meddling in elections through purchases of ads? The answer is "no". And Asian countries are saying to Facebook and to Twitter and to Google, "We're going to make you filter out these ads; we're going to have restrictions on who can buy ads that are shown within our geography. You're going to help us monitor and filter political campaigns to make sure that there isn't illegal, illicit, false content spreading virally, whether at election time or otherwise."

You wouldn't be able to mention mixed capitalism, technocratic governance and social conservatism in the United States and have most people agree that they subscribe to these concepts. I'm contending that most Asians would.

Asia is so huge and so diverse. If you're talking about a region that reaches from the United Arab Emirates to Australia, how do history and geography tie it together?

History plays a big role in explaining it, because before 1650 this was everyone's understanding of Asia. Arab countries didn't think of themselves as the so-called Middle East. It took the British Empire to create that term.

The Silk Road, and its multiple eras — whether you go back 2,000, 1,000 or 500 years — this has historically been the extent of Asia. I think the rediscovery of that past through China's Belt and Road Initiative is going to accelerate the region's psychological reawakening.

You said you've measured the connections in the Asian system. What measurements and indices did you use?

Because Asia so big, you have to look at it at multiple levels. There's subregional integration, so West Asia integrating with West Asia, South Asia with South Asia, ASEAN with ASEAN, Northeast Asia with Northeast Asia. Each of those subregions has experienced substantial integration in the last thirty years. At the same time, they've experienced a lot more integration with each other, so — and this is basic econometrics — I simply took the volume of trade between any two pairs of Asian subregions fifteen years ago, ten years ago, five years ago and today. For all pairs, the volume is increasing. That's one measurement. Then I looked at the number of diplomatic bodies that bind them. Asian diplomats and foreign ministers used to fly more to Western countries than to their neighbouring countries in Asia. Now they fly more to Asian countries than to Western countries.

The integration is economic, diplomatic and perhaps cultural. The bottom line is that the number of Asians studying and living in each other's countries has gone through the roof. More Asians are choosing to stay home, in their own region. It's Western institutions — Yale, MIT and so forth — that are coming here.

When people look at the book title, they tend to react to it as a binary: if the future is Asian, it must suggest Western decline. Is this the case?

I've been saying the same thing for fifteen years, and it's even more true now: we live, for the first time in history, in a globally multipolar world, because previous multipolar eras were Western, and European. It's globally multipolar because we have Asian superpowers now, like China. And it's a multi-civilisational because not all the powers are Western. Every region, every continent now matters, to different degrees: Africa and Latin America matter, and not as colonies but as equal participants. They are still behind in their development, but they're equally sovereign participants in the global system and benefiting from that system. We've never existed in a world like that before.

Because the global pie is growing, it doesn't have to be zero-sum. In Western history, there is a perception that there always has to be one hegemon. But Asia has mostly been multipolar for most of its history, so it's not abnormal for Asians to appreciate multipolarity, whether in Asia or globally.

One of the most important, maybe buried, arguments I make is that to be a global power in the world today means to be influential in Asia. Otherwise you're just important in your neighbourhood. How do you prove that you're a global power? By being important in Asia, because this is where the people are; this is where all the other powers are. If you're not important here then you're not important globally.



In the past year, we've seen reports of surveillance and mass detentions in China; the clamping down on dissent by legislation in Thailand, Cambodia and Singapore; and the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in a Saudi embassy. How do democracy and human rights play into this Asian future?

One of the fundamental insights that political scientist Samuel Huntington gave to the world in the 1950s is that the degree of stateness is more important than the type of the regime. I'm interested in strengthening the quality of governance, and there are many ways to do that. One way is to have regular, fair, free and transparent elections, but that's not enough. So my question, on behalf of five billion Asians, is how do you achieve quality governance? Democracy will get you one-fifteenth of the way there, but what are your other fourteen-fifteenths? Do you have rule of law, a strong judiciary, an independent press? Do you have protection of civil rights? Do you have high-quality infrastructure and a good civil service? Do you have solid education, healthcare and welfare systems? I could give you many ways to achieve quality governance, and having elections is only one of those ways.

So where do you see Asia in terms of these other indices — not necessarily just elections, but things like a free press and civil liberties?

That's where transparency and accountability are key factors. Before you can have democracy you need transparency and accountability, because you can have democracy without accountability. Just saying "we're a democracy" doesn't mean anything to anyone who's spent time in a failed democracy, of which there are dozens.

Asia's made phenomenal strides in accountability: the president of Korea being ousted, the prime minister of Malaysia being so unceremoniously tossed out. Accountability is the root of democracy, and the root of accountability is transparency. Put the three together and you get good governance. Governments aren't going to last one term if people see that they're not being effective.

Transparency is on the rise in Asia even where democracy isn't, but accountability is what we want to see next. Even the Thai junta knows it had better deliver. In 2016 it held a constitutional referendum and the public said, "OK, you can hold on a little while longer, because you're doing a good job." A military regime isn't required to hold a referendum to ratify itself, but the Thai junta did it, and the Thai people are not idiots. Accountability is important; every regime realises that. Even the Burmese junta is starting to acknowledge that it needs to liberalise in some ways. It's trying to demonstrate what it's doing right, even though it's doing lots of things wrong.

Greater transparency leads to greater accountability, and there are very few places where both of those aren't increasing. You see it in the frequent changes in government. I look at the upcoming elections in India, Indonesia and the Philippines. You're asking me about democracy in Asia? Around 1.8 billion Asians will vote in the next six months. And those elections aren't rigged. They're transparent; the judgement will be passed by the people, who are holding their governments to account. What's not good about that? □

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