



# The great con

*Value-added Asia? Geremie R. Barmé argues that romantic hype about Asia has prevented Australia from finessing relations with a complex region*

## IS AUSTRALIA AN ASIAN COUNTRY? Can Australia Survive in an East Asian Future?

Stephen FitzGerald  
Allen & Unwin  
\$19.95 pb, 191pp

## WILL ASIA BOUNCE BACK?

Paul Krugman  
A speech made to Credit Suisse First  
Boston, Hong Kong, March  
(<http://web.mit.edu/krugman/www/suisse.html>)

## PARADIGMS OF PANIC: Asia Goes Back to the Future

Paul Krugman  
Posted in Slate, March 12  
(<http://www.slate.com/Dismal/98-03-12/Dismal.asp>)

## THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE ASIAN CENTURY: False Starts on the Path to the Global Millennium

Christopher Lingle  
Edicions Sirocco  
\$US25 (\$38) (includes postage) hb, 220 pp

## THE TYRANNY OF FORTUNE: Australia's Asian Destiny

Reg Little and Warren Reed  
Business & Professional Publishing  
\$29.95 pb, 212 pp

## WHAT CAUSED ASIA'S ECONOMIC AND CURRENCY CRISIS AND ITS GLOBAL CONTAGION?

Nouriel Roubini  
(<http://www.stern.nyu.edu/~nroubini/asia/AsiaHomepage.html>)

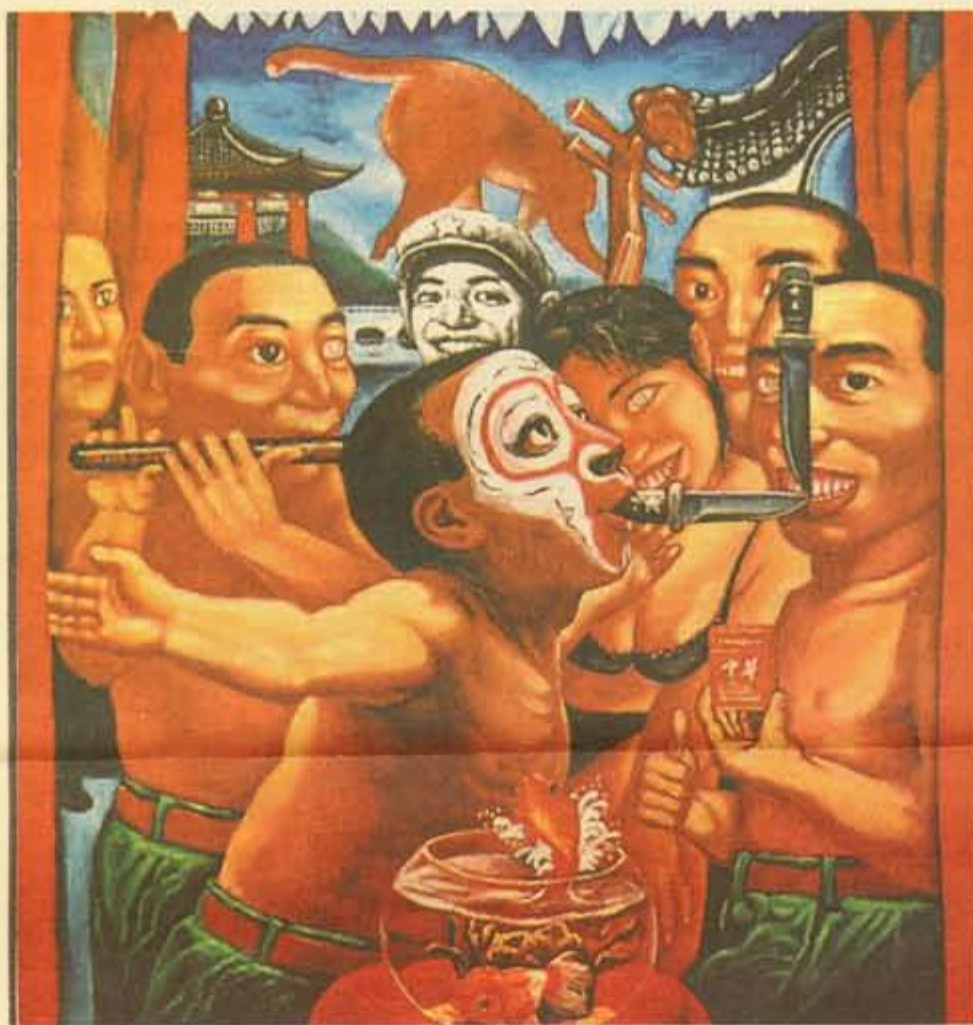
## RE ORIENT: Change in Asian Societies

Aat Vervoorn  
Oxford University Press  
\$39.95 pb, 320 pp

CHINA WATCHING, LIKE KREMLINOLOGY among former Soviet analysts, has accrued a certain odium in recent decades. The track record of specialists in Chinese current affairs, like that of many Sovietologists, has been fairly abysmal. Few managed — either in China or overseas — to get it right: the anti-rightist purge of the late 1950s; the murderous famines of the 1960s; the meaning of Mao Zedong's apotheosis, the Cultural Revolution; the fall of Marshal Lin Biao; the ineluctable rise of Deng Xiaoping; the fall from grace of Hu Yaobang in 1986 and Zhao Ziyang in 89; even the waning of Qiao Shi's star last year.

Sinologists recognise that China-watching is an arcane pursuit, its object more elusive by far than the study of oracle bones or Shang dynasty bronzes. For it demands of its practitioners accurate predictions about the political future of a restive nation whose rulers have all too often found themselves to be out of step with the times or simply ill-informed.

Thus it was with good reason — and no little venom — that Simon Leys (nom de plume of the Canberra-based Sinologist



KNIFE EDGE: *Excitement No. 11: Balancing Act*, 1996 by Guo Jian FROM BEYOND CHINA, AN EXHIBITION AT CAMPBELLTOWN CITY BICENTENNIAL ART GALLERY, SYDNEY, UNTIL MAY 3

Pierre Ryckmans) wrote some years ago: "Paris taxidrivers are notoriously sophisticated in their use of invective. 'Hé, va donc, structuraliste!' is one of their recent apostrophes — which makes one wonder when they will start calling their victims 'China experts!'"

Although expletives such as "Hé, va donc, postmoderniste!" may be passé in today's Paris, in light of the Asian economic crisis, you can't help wondering how long it will be before Sydney or Melbourne taxidrivers add a new line of spleen to their deprecations: "Watch where you're goin', you... economist!"

How tiresome, indeed, it has been during the past decade to hear the nouveau-converts to Asia literacy lecture on the virtues of the Asian world. "Asian Values" has been touted as some unique concatenation of spiritual and cultural factors that have been at the core of the extraordinary economic developments from Japan through to India, China down to Indonesia, since the 1970s. Australians have been among the most self-righteous and tireless advocates of the Asian Values myth.

Although published only last year, Reg Little and Warren Reed's *The Tyranny of Fortune* has become an instant curio. The authors are vocal proponents of Asian uniqueness and the need for Australia to understand and enmesh itself with the values of this mysterious region in some meaningful and con-

structive way.

Since the harsh reality and deeper significance of the events of recent months will probably do little to undermine the authors' confidence in their thesis, it is instructive here to put on record the 10 key Asian Values formulated by the writers, mostly on the basis of their contacts with China and Japan. Although I quote from Little and Reed's work, these values will be familiar to anyone who has sat through briefings on doing business in Asia, had to hear learned economic toffs, self-important media converts to Asia and know-it-all bureaucrats prattle on about the special cultural dimensions of the economic make-over of our northern neighbours.

I will use a metaphor taken from a hoary Australian popular convention, the two-up game, to contrast the idyllic Asian Values with those of people with a more sombre and realistic appraisal of the situation in many Asian nations discussed in Little and Reed's work. When things go wrong, values go south. The list of negative values that I offer here is compiled from a range of works both classical and contemporary published in China, a country central to Little and Reed's analysis. It is not a list of absolutes, nor of unique values, but a catalogue of what comes into view when we choose to see through the Asian leaders' new clothes.

One of the most popular and widely

read volumes that debunks notions of unique cultural values in China is Li Zongwu's humorous study, *The Science of the Thick and the Black* (circa 1910). Predating both C. Northcote Parkinson's *Parkinson's Law* and Lawrence J. Peter's *The Peter Principle* (both of which have been available in Chinese since the 1980s), Li adumbrates for his readers the road to success in an age of chaos, competition and danger in the following terms:

We are all born with a face and to be thick-skinned is its prerogative. God also gave us all a heart and it can be as black as pitch. The face and heart... seem to have no extraordinary qualities. But upon closer scrutiny you will discover there is no limit to how thick the skin on a person's face can become; and nothing can compare with the blackness a heart can attain. All things dear to man can come about from being thick-skinned and black-hearted: fame and wealth, palaces, wives and concubines, clothes, chariots, and horses.

"Thick and black" (*houhei*) has been an epithet for scheming bureaucrats, wily business people and clever operators in China ever since. Asian Values have given a raft of authoritarian rulers, their bureaucrats and business people (not to mention those in so-called liberal democracies) a legitimising veneer of the "thick and black" as they pursue their agendas, all the while dismissing independent comment and analysis as cultural imperialism and orientalist revanchism. But let us review the list of Asian Values for better and for worse:

### OBLIGATION

**Heads:** An emphasis on obligation within society rather than rights, and a complex tradition of mutually interacting pressures to ensure that all members are caught within the network of obligation and share both responsibilities and rewards.

**Tails:** Obligations forged on the basis of hierarchical pressure and unspoken principles of deference entrap individuals in a strangling network of "sentiment deficits" that lead to stagnation, or, under the pressure of rapid change and the collapse of interpersonal relations, to unbridled avarice and systemic indecision or miscalculation.

### RULE OF VIRTUE

**Heads:** An emphasis on rule by man, or virtue, rather than the law, which maximises the harmony and cohesion possible in society, stresses ritual or rites and tends to ensure that competition is pursued within a framework of established ceremony and courtesy, which preserves social consensus.

**Tails:** Leaders grow old, ineffectual or senile. Their rule by virtue is often the result of ossified political habits that do not admit of change or social matu-