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Singapore can be more adventurous

WITH a twinkle of child-like wonder in his eye, historian Prasenjit Duara is ever hopeful. Here he is on:

■ **The deadliest moments in world history:**
"When profits and prophets come together."

■ **What drives the world:**
"History changes very fast and under capitalism, it changes faster still."

■ **The 21st century's biggest problem:**
"We've reached the point where nobody is willing to give up anything for anything."

■ **The need to think about others more:**
"National goals and ideas continue to be the most important means for people to get ahead in society. But they're also very limiting, especially when we want to create new goals."

■ **Why earlier notions about citizenship have to change:**
"(Countries like Armenia, India and Pakistan) literally taught you how to love your country and hate your enemies. Chinese textbooks have enormous amounts of 'who's the enemy' and 'who's the friend'."

■ **Why multi-culturalism is especially vital today:**
"We're entering a stage where cultural hybridity and cultural connections are going to be central to survival and sustainability."

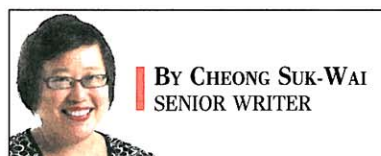
■ **Singapore:**
"Because of its location, Singapore is overly careful and does not take major risks especially in society and culture. But there seems to be enough economic and social security for it to be a little more adventurous."

■ **A Singaporean he admires:**
"I'm a great fan of (Foreign Minister) George Yeo, who's very visionary. Whenever I hear him say something, I'm very encouraged. We need (his ideas) to translate more on the ground."
CHEONG SUK-WAI

and so are (simultaneously doing that) and region-building. It's one thing to have different links across time and another thing to have an evolving system of integration, which we don't. I think economically and culturally, there will be more connections. But (not) politically and militarily and we shouldn't try to make those.

What we should try (to do) is go with what we have and develop fora for negotiation.

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BY CHEONG SUK-WAI
SENIOR WRITER

CHINA and India have their fair share of peasants. So why is it that rural revolutions galvanized the dragon but not the elephant? Indian-born historian Prasenjit Duara (above) pondered that deeply as he grew up in the 1950s. That led to his fascination with China's history as well as the idea of nation states and national identity.

A graduate of India's elite Doon School and of Harvard University, the career of the historian of China has spanned the universities of Stanford, Princeton, George Mason, Chicago, Tokyo - and now the National University of Singapore, where he is the Raffles Professor of Humanities as well as director of research in the humanities and social sciences.

Professor Duara, 59, hails from Assam, India. The married father of one reads and speaks Chinese and Japanese, beside English, Hindi and his mother tongue Assamese. A prolific writer, his best-known book is *Culture, Power And The State*, which has won two top peer accolades. Over coffee and oatmeal cookies in his office recently, Prof Duara told me where Asia's best bets for the future lay:

■ **What forces have most shaped the Asia we know today?**
Maritime trade, which was important for

the spread of ideas and changes in a way that I don't think the world had seen. For example, the spread of Buddhism all over Asia through such trade was comparable to the spread of Christianity elsewhere, but it was not accompanied by warfare.

■ **How has this set Asia apart?**

If you look at the Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - they are organised like proto-nations. It's all one under God, right? So you have a state, a church and believers (who) identify themselves as believers versus non-believers. But belief is not so central in the non-Abrahamic traditions...There isn't a strong Us versus Other kind of identity.

So it's not surprising that when the West began to move very aggressively into the realm of Asian trade from the 17th century, they began with a lot of violence. One of the first things you see when you go to the islands off Goa in India are these big Shiva statues in caves (that) have all been beheaded. I don't want to romanticise Asia, (but) violence for the sake of faith did not become the mainstream in Asia.

■ **But weren't, say, the Indochinese kings always at war?**

Well, you had semi-theocratic states and they certainly went after each other, but more for political gains. There was not a crusade. They were not motivated or reinforced by the motive to convert (others) or defend their faith.

■ **Why then can't we speak of an integrated Asia?**

That's a very good question. One reason is that Asia itself - let's get it straight -

is a name of the Greeks for a certain part of what we today call Asia...It became a term for ourselves only in the early 20th century when various Chinese, Japanese and Indian thinkers - Zhang Taiyuan, Okakura Tenshin and Rabindranath Tagore, among them - tried to create a counter-image of Asia. One can say that the theme of Asian values (today) is a continuation of the Tagorean imagery of Asia as having some essential unity.

■ **So there's really little to unite Asia?**

Asia is in fact a believable region not because of some ancient imagined unity but because of the actual, multiple links that exist. What's even more important are the dangers of not integrating. We have a lot of common problems, (such as) climate change. To address these, we really have to change our attitude towards nationalism...The very idea of a modern history is designed very much to strengthen the belief that the nation is the natural carrier of people in time.

■ **But how can that be?**

Yes, how can that be? People couldn't have known they were going to end up as modern nations, right? But (nationalism) became the instrument of pedagogy...and in some East Asian states, it's worked very strongly so people feel very invested in their nation and find it very difficult to sacrifice or give up anything other than for the nation.

■ **But surely it's now a case of "every man for himself"?**

That has very much to do with the neo-liberal economic policies which developed in the post-Cold War era. Even in the Cold War, the people's rhetoric

was at least "for the greater good of democracy" or "for the greater good of socialism". Now, it's for the greater good of my consumption!

■ **Isn't that the root of today's evils?**

Exactly. So for me, one way (is for Asia) to try and think of a greater goal, (which) cannot be (about) pitting Asia against its global competitors, because that would be back to the old game.

■ **So what should the new game be?**

Something that...brings out the most altruistic in us. We need a massive new education programme that teaches us to be civic citizens of the region and the world. (In this), Singapore has...managed to do certain things quite well.

■ **Such as?**

Such as multi-culturalism. You have this very diverse population that could be at each other's throats - and were, at one point - but have managed to live with each other. And with...every other generation, you get more and more mixed...It may seem a little corny to people coming from the West, but it works.

■ **But it may not work forever.**

Yes...these things are also very changeable...It's one thing to say you must have two people (from different races) living in the same housing project, but it's another to have their children understand in school why it is important to encounter other cultures.

■ **Speaking of change, Asia seems to be having too many demands on it to change.**

Yes, Asia's having everything thrown in at the same time but I don't see that as a huge problem. Asians are very much younger in the process of nation-building