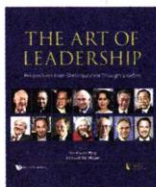


Review

Worthy tome with flaws among the gems



NON-FICTION THE ART OF LEADERSHIP

Edited by Ho Kwon
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★★★☆☆

Venessa Lee

The Art Of Leadership is an uneven collection of lectures on this topic given by world leaders, who were invited to speak at Singapore Management University over the past 15 years or so.

Diplomatic platitudes are interspersed with gems of insight.

In these pages, some statesmen dutifully extol virtues such as meritocracy and a respect for markets.

Their cautious speeches look as dull as a pile of pebbles next to the glinting intelligence of thinkers

such as American political philosopher Francis Fukuyama.

In a lecture in 2014, Dr Fukuyama posits a string of sparkly ideas, such as “getting to Denmark”, where the Scandinavian country becomes a symbol for a prosperous, democratic, well-governed state.

In some quarters, Denmark can also be viewed as the aspirational hope for a failing state like Somalia.

The problem, Dr Fukuyama says, is that “the Danes themselves do not know how Denmark came to be”. The long process of creating Denmark’s political institutions is arguably lost in the mist of the past.

Contrary to received wisdom, Dr Fukuyama also theorises that the first modern state, formed through unremitting military competition, was invented in China – 1,800 years before Europe.

The interest in this book lies not only in such ideas, but also in how proclamations of the past are viewed through the lens of the present.

Dr Fukuyama, who famously and falsely proclaimed The End Of History in the 1990s, with the apparent triumph of Western liberal

democracy, ironically comes across as fresh as a daisy.

What is intriguing are views such as those espoused by Nobel Peace Prize recipient Aung San Suu Kyi, who faces censure internationally over her silence in the Rohingya issue.

In a speech in 2013, she says: “I do not think that soldiers should become politicians.”

The phrase shines an equivocal light on the strong military influence in Myanmar, where hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have been targeted by soldiers.

Ms Suu Kyi also says that “leadership means convincing those who you aspire to lead that the way you have chosen is the right one”.

It is curious how the past insists on intruding into present-day politics. The path she has chosen does not seem clear to the outside world.

Once, people may have wondered at how she endured years of house arrest and not being beside her husband when he died.

Here, Ms Suu Kyi seems more of an enigma than ever, seemingly haunted by her own words.