

What Became of the Asian Century?

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Until two years ago, the centre of world power was moving from West to East. Asia was rising, and the humiliations suffered since the Opium War were about to be rectified. Western domination was doomed, and “The Asian” or “The Pacific Century” was about to begin. Such expectations formed the mental framework for the festivities in Hong Kong on 1 July 1997, when the Union Jack went down, and the red Chinese flag went up. On the following day, 2 July 1997, an event in Bangkok put an end to all talk of “The Asian century.” The Thai bath had for weeks been under attack from speculators, and the Thai National Bank was forced to give up the peg of the bath to the US dollar. The value of the Thai currency nose-dived, and the Crisis was a fact. The old Greek word “Asia,” which had been introduced to the region by Europeans in the 19th century, and which since the 1980s had been associated with hard work, high savings rates, and miraculous economic growth, was now instead linked up with Crisis, Corruption and Crony Capitalism.

What became of the Asian Century?

The Global Pendulum

Before answering, we must look at the intellectual underpinnings for the thought that a century can belong to a particular region or continent. The term “The Asian Century” is part of a “theory” of a global pendulum, swinging between East and West. From the 18th to the 20th century it was swinging westwards. The 19th century belonged to Europe and the 20th to America. Towards the end of “The American century,” the pendulum started to swing back again, not to Africa, but across the Pacific to the other side of the globe, ending in East Asia, which had also been the main centre of human history in the pre-industrial age.

The theory of the global pendulum was expressed succinctly by the Asian Development Bank in its report *Emerging Asia*, which had the misfortune of being published in mid-1997, just as the Asian Crisis

struck: “From a broad historical perspective, Asia is not emerging so much as reemerging. For much of human history, parts of Asia were the most economically advanced regions in the world. (...) In 1820, at the beginning of the industrial age, Asia still made up an estimated 58 percent of world GDP. This share fell precipitously in the following 100 years (...) Based on plausible assumptions, Asia could be back at around 57 percent of the world’s GDP by 2025” (ADB 1997: 10–11).

The most immediate background for the idea of “The Asian Century” is the concept “The American Century,” which first gained currency in February 1941, when the American publisher Henry Luce (whose fight for American values had been stimulated by his upbringing in China) used it as title for an article in his magazine *Life*. Thus the concept of “The American Century” only really became known when the century was in the middle of its run.

The theory of the East-West pendulum structured the 20th century’s main American synthesis of world history, William H. McNeill’s book *The Rise of the West*, which was published in 1963. McNeill divided world history into periods of shifting regional dominance: the pendulum hang over the Mediterranean from 500 BC to 200 AD, then swung east to India where it stayed until 600, switched back to the Middle East 600–1000, then swayed east to China 1000–1500, and subsequently shifted westwards to Western Europe and North America from 1500 to 2000. McNeill did not distinguish between a European and an American century, but viewed the West as a whole. The concept “The West” is linked to the idea of an Atlantic period in world history, which forms the background for the concept “The Pacific Century.”

Throughout the 1990s, the much used *Europa Yearbook* for the Far East and Australasia included an article by Dean Forbes about regional developments, starting with the sentence: “The Pacific century is approaching.”¹ The concept “The Pacific Century” covers the same expected realities as “The Asian Century,” but is still in some ways different. When an ocean rather than a land mass is set to constitute a region, one automatically puts less emphasis on production and infantry, and more on trade, communications and navies. Sea-based periodisations are also more inclusive than the land-based ones. The Atlantic centuries gave room for Western Europe, the east coast of America and the west coast of Africa. Of the continents only Asia and Australia were left entirely out. Correspondingly both East Asia, Australia and America can have their share of the Pacific Century, while Europe, Africa and India

¹ Dean Forbes is not a man easily swayed by contemporary trends. He retained his “Pacific Century” forecast in the 1998 edition, and added in the 1999 edition: “The financial and economic crisis that became apparent in mid-1997 has troubled many Asian economies, but is unlikely to hinder the long term development of the region.”

are sidelined. Typically, when president George W. Bush in February 2002 repeated the prediction that the new century would be Pacific, it was in an address to the Japanese parliament.²

This essay will discuss “The Asian Century,” while paying some attention to “The Pacific Century,” in three different ways:

- 1) as an implicit *description* of 20th century trends,
- 2) as a *prediction* for the 21st century,
- 3) as an *artifact* from the years 1989–97.

“The Asian Century” as Implicit Description

Prognoses are extrapolations of existing trends, prolongations of the past into the future. They therefore tend to say more about the past than the future. Could it be the same way with the prediction that the 21st century will be “The Asian” or “The Pacific Century?” Perhaps the 20th century has not just been America’s or belonged to “The West.” Maybe the locus of population, economy and power has already shifted eastwards in the 20th century, and that the writings about “The Asian Century” should be understood as implicit descriptions of this shift.

First let us note that the 20th century looks different from an eastern and a western angle. From the western angle it is generally seen as short, dramatic and tragic, characterised by totalitarianism and war. Eric Hobsbawm speaks in his *Age of Extremes* about “the Short Twentieth Century, that is to say (...) the years from the outbreak of the First World War to the collapse of the USSR which, as we can now see in retrospect, forms a coherent historical period that has now ended...” (Hobsbawm 1994: 5), and he sees this Short Century as a sequence to the Long Century he has described in his earlier books, stretching from the 1780s to 1914. The Short Century started with a catastrophic epoch, characterised by two world wars around a crisis, then included a 25–30 years golden age from 1945 to 1973, and ended in a new disastrous epoch from 1973 to 1991, which he has chosen to call “The Landslide.” During these years the world “lost its bearings and slid into instability and crisis” (Hobsbawm 1994: 403). If humanity is to have a recognizable future, says Hobsbawm, “it cannot be by prolonging the past or the present.” If mankind tries to build the third millennium on the basis of trends from the second, then humanity will fail, and the price of failure is “darkness.” “Darkness” is the book’s last word. Eric Hobsbawm is a British marxist. He has lived through most of the 20th century and shared the socialist

vision which shipwrecked in 1989–91. Another western leftist historian, the American Gabriel Kolko, applied the same perspective in his centennial synthesis, which carries the title *Century of War* (Kolko 1994). Hobsbawm and Kolko are not alone. The idea of the tragic Short Century has become a western myth.

What, then, is the basis for this myth? Hobsbawm claims that the last part of the century was a catastrophe for substantial parts of the world, such as Africa, the former Soviet Union and the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe. One should notice that he does not mention America, Western Europe or Asia, which also are substantial parts of the world. From an Asian perspective the last quarter of the 20th century does not at all, despite the Asian Crisis, seem catastrophic. The two decades from 1973 to 1997 were full of hope and improvement, and this forms a continuation of a century-long trend, starting in humiliation, ending in prosperity and hope. For Asians, the century did not start in 1914. The European so-called First World War was not of great importance. Asia’s Long Century had started earlier, with the Opium War and the loss of Hong Kong, with the unequal treaties and the creation of centralised colonial states in South and Southeast Asia. And Asia’s century did not end with the downfall of real European socialism in 1989–91. The socialist regimes in China, Vietnam, Laos and North Korea survived, and three of them were able to integrate their nations in the regional process of industrialisation and economic growth.

In which ways then has the 20th century been an Asian Century? *Demographically*, there has been a shift from West to East (and North to South). At mid-century there were approximately 1.4 billion people in East, South and Southeast Asia. Now the populations have increased to some 3.5 billion, 1.5 billion in East Asia, 1.5 billion in South Asia and more than 500 million in Southeast Asia.³ The growth has been most rapid in South Asia, where the population has tripled since 1950. Meanwhile, population growth in Europe and North America has almost stagnated, so there is no doubt that world population has shifted towards Asia. Has Asia been strengthened or weakened by this growth? Demographic growth is not necessarily a sign of strength. Africa’s population growth has not, for instance, made it more prosperous or influential. To some extent the same can be said of South Asia. East and Southeast Asia, however, have already gone through the first phase of the “demographic transition,” with declining mortality being followed by reduced fertility and thus in slower demographic growth rate (Caldwell & Caldwell 1997). Countries such as Vietnam and China now have a growth rate only slightly above the replacement level. Japan’s drastic decline in

² AFP, Tokyo, in *The Nation* (Bangkok), 20.2.02.

³ *Framtid med Asien: Föreläsning till en svensk Asienstrategi*. Stockholm: Regeringskansliet, Utrikesdepartementet, Ds 1998:61, p. 51.

fertility has led to worries about an aging population. The other Asian nations, have an abundant youthful work force, but not so many children to look after as before. These changes have already contributed to a general rise in the standard of living. Demographically, Asia differs from other world regions by having a relatively high share of the population living in the countryside. The last decades have seen rapid urbanization.

Politically, Asia's 20th century history is about liberation from colonial rule, the formation of independent nation-states, and a gradual strengthening of state power at the expense of local communities.

Villages are no longer the independent kingdoms they used to be, and when Macao reverts to Chinese rule just before the turn of the millennium, there will not be a single western colony left. The political history of the 20th century is also about struggles for national unification, in China and Vietnam, with victories in 1949 and 1975. 1975 marked the victory of an Asian people against the world's leading Western power, a sequence to the Japanese victory against Russia in 1905 and against Britain in 1942.

From a nationalist perspective the struggle for national unification continues until North and South Korea have been unified, and the Chinese have resolved the status of Taiwan. Thus the Long Asian Century is not yet over, but in terms of national liberation and unification it has already been Asian indeed. It started in subjugation, and approaches its end with a number of proud, independent nations.

Economically, Asia has seen tremendous growth, a growth often described with the allegory "flying geese." The leading goose was Japan, who started its industrialisation already in the beginning of the century, won status as a great power, was defeated in its war for a Greater Asia, but rose again economically to become a world leading nation in exports of high quality products. After the leading goose came the Newly Industrialised Countries (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore), and in the third line Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. Then, from 1979, the big goose China also followed suit with reforms ensuring rapid economic growth.⁴ In the 1990s it became the foremost goal of almost any state in the region to achieve rapid economic growth and increased standards of living. Between 1965 and 1990 Asia as a whole had an annual GDP growth per inhabitant of 3.8 percent. This was mainly due to East Asia, where annual growth according to one calculation was 6.7 percent over a period of 25 years.⁵ In the 15 years from 1980 to 1995

Asia's share of the world's total production increased from 16.2 percent to 26.8 percent.⁶ This was much lower than the share of population, but the economy grew far more rapidly than the population. East Asia's economic growth in the period that Hobsbawm calls "The Landslide" was so momentous that it can only be compared to North America's fabulous growth a hundred years earlier.

Culturally, it is more difficult to portray the 20th century as Asian. Much of Asia's liberation and growth resulted from emulation of Western customs and values. The capitalist confucian ethic, hailed by proponents of 'Asian values', is not much different from Max Weber's capitalist protestant ethic. Nation states have been formed using European state forms as models. Western legislation has been copied, and Asians have become individual consumers of products either designed in the West or designed to please a westernised audience. There are of course a number of Asian contributions to world culture, Asian cuisine, healing practices, meditation, martial arts, and karaoke, but these are minuscule in comparison with the impact that western consumer culture has had on Asian populations. Asian media have been thoroughly influenced by the west. There have certainly been cases of cultural mobilisation against western cultural influence, but the most successful of the anti-western movements, communism, was itself inspired by a western doctrine. An attempt to establish a political programme based on so-called "Asian values" was made in the first half of the 1990s, but it does not have anything like unanimous support in the East Asian region, and even less in South Asia, where the nations take pride in their electoral democracy.

To sum up: Demographically the 20th century has indeed been Asian. In terms of political liberation and national unification it has also been a Long Asian Century, although no Asian country has had a comparable influence in world politics to that of the leading western powers, and Asian countries have been unable to form their own bloc in world affairs. Instead they have remained divided. Economically, the three last decades of the century were also thoroughly Asian. Rapid economic growth has been the main basis for the whole discourse of the "Asian" or "Pacific Century". Only in the cultural field does it seem impossible to characterise the 20th century as Asian.

It is even more reasonable to call the 20th century "The Pacific Century." There has been a drastic transfer of population, production and power from the east to the west coast of America. Trade and communications across the Pacific have grown tremendously. In 1979, the value of Pacific trade surpassed that across the Atlantic, and is now far ahead. The Atlantic area remains more secure since it has a dominant

⁴ Figures were no doubt exaggerated. Until the Asian Crisis, they were usually accepted at face value. After the Asian Crisis, a new fashion emerged of exaggerating China's weaknesses, and disregard its extremely impressive economic transformation since 1979. See Gerald Segal, "Does China Matter?", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 78, no. 5, Sept/Oct. 1999, pp. 24-36.

⁵ ADB, *Emerging Asia*, p. 1. The figures are not ordinary GDP figures, but figures adjusted for "purchasing power parities" (PPP). They use the 1985 dollar as basis (100) and are taken from Robert Summers and Alan Heston, *Penn World Table*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1994.

⁶ *Framtid med Asien: Förslag till en svensk Asienstrategi*. Stockholm: Regenskamskåpet, Utrikesdepartementet, Ds 1998:61, p. 28.

military alliance (NATO), but the US maintains a heavy military presence also in East Asia. Despite some popular misgivings, this presence seems welcome by most countries because it tends to deter actions that could threaten regional peace.

The question of whether the 20th century has been American or Asian, Atlantic or Pacific, depends on the criteria we choose. If a region must dominate the world in order to be attributed a century, then the 20th century was certainly not Asian, but then it can also be discussed to what extent it was American. American power has been balanced by others, and also by constraints imposed on US power projectors by America's own political system. If the century should be attributed to the region that experienced the greatest demographic and economic growth, and the most dramatic changes in the direction of independence and state capacity, then at least the second half of the 20th century could well be said to have been Asian—or Pacific.

What, then, about the next century?

“The Asian Century” as Prediction

“As we approach the end of the twentieth century, there seems little room for doubt that East Asia will dominate the coming century...,” says Rhoads Murphey in the textbook *East Asia: A New History*, published in 1997. Unfortunately the sentence does not end there, but continues: “...dominate the coming century even more than it does now.” Since East Asia cannot be said to *dominate* now at all, the sentence seems without meaning, but most readers will understand it as a prediction that East Asia will dominate the world in the 21st century. Rhoads Murphey is not alone to have made such a prediction. We have already quoted the Asian Development Bank, who claimed in 1997 that Asia's share of the world output is likely to rise to about 57 percent already by 2025, a return to its level at the beginning of the industrial revolution (ADB 1997: 50).

How likely is it that Asia will dominate the 21st century? Which conditions must be met for this to happen? Most of the Asian century predictions have been based on statistical extrapolations of ongoing trends.

In the field of *demography* this led to exaggerated apprehensions back in the 1950s for an “Asian drama” with hungry masses searching for food. Then agricultural output grew, and from the 1960s, fertility declined. From the 1970s, the demographic growth rates also declined. The latest predictions are that East Asia's share of the world population will soon start going down, while South and West Asia, and Africa, continue to increase their share. The East Asian “demographic

transition,” if not interrupted, will represent momentous change, possibly contributing to levelling off the world population by the end of the next century.

The main prognoses used to predict the Asian century have been *economic*. GDP growth in the last few decades has been extrapolated into the 21st century. A few decades ago, such prognoses were crude and simple, and were therefore easy to criticise. In the 1990s, prognoses became more sophisticated, but not necessarily more reliable. One change was that GDP was often measured in accordance with so-called purchasing-power-parities (ppp), rather than the dollar value of products, measured in accordance with currency rates. This change in method led to a sudden inflation of GDP figures for countries with low prices, such as China. Thus there was suddenly a rapid Chinese catchup with the West. It was often claimed that China could surpass the USA and become the world's biggest economy already in the 2030s. This was based on the flawed assumption that ppp-figures are suitable to represent a nation's combined strength. They are not. Ppp-figures are useful indicators of a country's living standard, but not of the national strength, which is determined by what the nation can buy internationally.⁷ Once we realise this, we see that China will remain relatively poor for a long time. The combined GDP of China's 1.2 billion inhabitants in 1996 was lower than that of Italy's 58 million. The GDP of the United States was eight times that of China. In late August 1999, the journal *Asiaweek* estimated that China would have an average growth of 6.5 percent in the next decade, while the USA would get only 2.6 percent. If we assume that the two countries retain these widely different growth levels not only for one decade but several (which seems unlikely), then China will catch up with the United States in 2056. However, if China continues to have five times as many inhabitants as the United States (which is likely) the Americans will still be five times more prosperous.

The ppp-adjustment was not the only method used to boost predictions for growth in Asia. In its study *Emerging Asia*, the Asian Development Bank also applied what is called convergence theory. It published a table of growth prospects for a range of Asian economies up to 2025, and built convergence assumptions into the table. The convergence theory is based on the assumption that countries who for many years have experienced a high economic growth will tend to grow more slowly. This is the reasonable part of the theory. However, the ADB also assumed that all poor countries would start to grow rapidly, if only they applied “East Asian policies”. Thus the highest growth figures in the

⁷ Ppp-figures are also not suitable as basis for growth predictions, since economic growth will normally lead domestic prices to gradually conform with international prices, and thus progressively deprive a nation of the ‘extra bonus’ gained through the ppp-calculation.

next few decades were expected in countries such as China, India, and Indonesia. It goes without saying that with high growth assumptions for Asia's three most populous nations, it was easy for the ADB to "prove" its prediction that Asia could have 57 percent of the world's GDP by 2025.

The convergence theory was silly, but the exaggerated optimism of the Asian Development Bank was shared in 1997 by some UN agencies, notably the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), whose *Human Development Report* advanced the idea that absolute poverty might soon be eradicated worldwide. This shows how careful one should be when using economic growth figures to predict regional developments. The Asian Crisis showed how silly some predictions were, but if we now get renewed growth in the region, the exaggerated figures may return. It does seem likely that East Asia will continue to increase its share of global production and trade in the next few decades, but not as rapidly as in the last quarter of the 20th century. And a growing share of production and trade cannot be automatically translated into power.

The kind of power one should think that a strong economy could buy, is *military*. Growing military capability has been enhanced by the general strengthening of state capacity in Asia during the second half of the 20th century, with steadily reduced risk of internal rebellions. Then also, in the post-cold war period, the high tech arms market in East Asia has been growing more than elsewhere in the world. But power projection technologies are in our time extremely expensive. According to military analysts, the 1990s has seen a widening gap in military projection capability between the United States, as the global leader, and virtually every other state. The only Asian country with the means to build an army that could challenge the USA, is Japan, and Japan remains a US alliance partner. The main guarantee of security in East Asia is the presence of US forces (mainly in Okinawa and South Korea), and the only way, it seems, that the East Asian nations can relieve themselves of the US military hegemony, is to build a comprehensive security structure of their own that would make the US presence superfluous. Little seems to indicate that such a security structure is in the making. Japan, China and India, the main Asian powers, remain deeply suspicious of each other.

Culturally, there is little to indicate that Asians are about to turn the trend and create new expressions of art, customs and values that can compete with Western culture for world dominance. To the contrary, the recent opening of new Asian markets to western cultural products have increased the impact of western values. This also applies for the software industry.

Politically, Asia lacks an effective organisation to voice Asian interests. The ASEAN includes only the ten Southeast Asian nations, not the more powerful East Asian ones, and APEC and the ARF encompass countries from the other side of the Pacific and, in the case of the ARF, from Europe. Asians will only be able to thoroughly influence world affairs if their nations are able to improve their relations with each other and speak with one voice, or if one or two of the great powers (Japan, China or India) decide to build a global agenda and get support for it from other important countries. There is not much to indicate that this is about to happen, although China's attempt to build a central Asian alliance, including Russia, in defence of national sovereignty and the right to non-intervention, may constitute a first step in that direction. The Asian crisis has weakened the only purely Asian international organisation, ASEAN, and led to deeper divisions between regimes promoting electoral democracy and regimes professing "Asian values".

To conclude, it is not a given that the 21st century will be more "Asian" than the 20th century has been, although economic growth in the last few decades has created a platform for Asians to go on with their quest for prosperity and power. One of the factors that may influence the course of Asia's development is the extent to which Asians think of themselves as "Asian". As a locus of identity Asia will continue to find strong rivals in the nation, the religious community, and mankind as a whole. When an individual somewhere in Asia looks beyond the nation and religious community for a larger frame of identity, it is not at all obvious that he or she will stop at "Asia". Next stop may well be the globe.

"The Asian Century" as artifact

When looking at the concept "The Asian Century" as a historical artifact, we shall not be interested in the next century, and only a small part of the 20th century. All our interest will focus on the 1990s, when the concept was being promoted, used and (perhaps temporarily) abandoned. What we should ask is who said what and why?

The Cold War made it easy to understand the world. It was divided East-West and North-South, between the free, capitalist West and the authoritarian, socialist East, between the rich exploitative North and the poor developing (or under-developed) South. The end of the Cold War made power relations uncertain, and uncertainties concerning the world order persisted through the rest of the century. Such uncertainties always constitute an invitation to social scientists, intellectuals, business gurus and politicians to offer their views on the past and present world order.

Many tried in the 1990s, mainly Americans, but without managing to shape a concerted vision. The one getting the greatest attention was Samuel Huntington, who first published a provocative article in *Foreign Affairs* and then followed up with the book *The Clash of Civilizations* in 1996. His message was that the ideological antagonisms earlier in the century had taken attention away from more profound conflicts between civilisations, each with its own geographical sphere. Huntington wished to defend uniquely Western values against influence from other civilisations. Thus he urged westerners to leave other civilisations alone and abstain from trying to absorb them in a "global culture."

Huntington provoked many reactions, but did not get much support, not even in Washington. The Clinton administration has seen it as an obligation to protect the liberal global order, wherever it has been threatened, and has not seen fit to abstain from promoting liberal values in the spheres of other civilisations. In East Asia the USA has tried to strike a balance between a range of foreign policy goals: maintain the alliance with Japan, engage China, criticise Beijing for violations of human and patent rights, encourage regional co-operation in dismantling impediments to trade, but warn against regional initiatives to control capital movements or shape an independent, Asian identity.

It was within a framework of uncertainty as to the coming world order that the ideas of the "Asian" or "Pacific Century" were promoted, through speeches, business fairs, newspaper articles, television programmes, and also some books and articles.

Some of the books and articles will here be examined and divided into different categories, but let us first mention a category which does not seem to have appeared in any open, well publicised discourse, namely racist warnings against "the yellow danger." This was a theme one hundred years earlier, but it may be a testimony to general human progress that no similar racism gained currency in the 1990s. Samuel Huntington, it should be emphasised, did not warn against a "yellow danger," just against the undermining of Western values *in the West* through excessive interaction with other civilisations.

The first category of books to be mentioned here is *airport bestsellers* aiming at a market of business travellers. The two main books of this kind were John Naisbitt's *Megatrends Asia* and Jim Rohwer's *Asia Rising*, both from 1995. The first was highly speculative, the second surprisingly sound. Naisbitt exaggerated trends in order to catch attention: "In the 1990s Asia came of age. As we move toward the year 2000, Asia will become the dominant region of the world: economically, politically, and culturally. We are on the threshold of the Asian Renaissance (...) we are moving towards the Asianization of the world. The global axis of

influence has shifted from West to East. Asia was once the center of the world, and now the center is again returning to Asia."⁸

Jim Rohwer's ultra-liberalist book ascribed the success of East Asians to the smallness of their states and their ability of these states to refrain from protecting citizens through European-style welfare programmes, did not exaggerate the rise of Asia. Rohwer even guessed that, around 2000, Asia's economic growth would "suddenly slow down." When that happens, he said, "it will seem that "Asia" itself has faltered." Still he warned against that conclusion and predicted that Asia would continue to grow twice as fast as the West well into the next century, but not three times as fast, as during the last two decades. Rohwer emphasised that already in the first decade of the next century there would be a consumer class of one billion people in East Asia, who would present the West, in particular America, with "some of the most extraordinary business and financial opportunities ever."⁹

The second category of books are the development reports from institutions such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the UNDP (Human Development Report) and the reports produced as bases for the new Swedish Asia strategy which was adopted in 1999. These publications were extremely influential because this kind of reports is seen as authoritative. The World Bank was first out with its Asian Miracle Report in 1993, which soon became a standard reference. The Asian Development Bank was, as mentioned, unlucky in issuing its broad *Emerging Asia* study just as the crisis killed the idea of "The Asian Century" in 1997. The team of authors, led by the two Harvard professors Jeffrey Sachs and David Bloom, had no chance to incorporate the signs of crisis when writing the report. Thus this report, which opened by claiming that "In large parts of Asia the gap with industrial countries is closing rapidly" (ADB 1997: 1) was subjected to ridicule, and did not gain much influence.

The Swedish foreign ministry was more fortunate. It only really starting working on its broad analysis when the crisis broke out, but also had enough sense of longer trends to avoid falling victim to excessive pessimism. The Swedish report had the same historical message about an Asian catchup as the ADB. One of the studies stated: "Historisk utgör Europa och Asien två huvudpoler i världscivilisationen ... Det var ... så sent som omkring år 1700 omöjligt att förutse den europeiska dominans som skulle följa genom handel, mission och kolonisering. ... Den industriella revolutionens teknologiska och vetenskapliga genombrott skulle förändra allt. Handeln övergick i kommersiell exploatering och

⁸ John Naisbitt, *Megatrends Asia*, pp. viii, xiii, cf. p. 218.

⁹ Jim Rohwer, *Asia Rising*, pp. 18-19, 348.

kolonisering med överlägsna militära maktnedel. Det är först i våra dagar som jämvikten börjat återställas.” (Asiatiska vägval: 11). Another study asked if the Asian crisis had refuted the idea of “The Asian Century,” and answered with a tentative no: “Hur fel kan då ADB och alla andra som hävdar att nästa sekel tillhör Asien tänkas ha? Upplever vi slutet på en tillväxtepok? ... Inget svar är helt givet. Det enda som är säkert är att återhämtningen tar tid och att regionens länder kommer att lyckas olika väl med de utmaningar de står inför. För Indonesien kan vägen tillbaka bli lång. Inget talar dock för att krisen skulle förvandla framgångarna i Asien till historia. De grundläggande förutsättningarna för förnyad tillväxt finns. Förutsatt fortsatta reformer kommer regionens ekonomier att spela en växande roll i den globala ekonomin.”¹⁰

There was in all of these reports a strong faith in the possibility that Asia would catch up and become a dominant world region in the 21st century, but the excessive optimism of the Asian Development Bank’s report from 1997 was soon tempered when the crisis took its toll.

The third category consisted of world historical narratives written by professional historians who tried to catch attention and reach a broader audience by including some perspectives on the future. The two main examples here are the works of Felipe Fernández-Armesto and Paul Kennedy. Fernández-Armesto discussed Asia’s most recent history in chapter 21 of his long and entertaining *Millennium: A History of Our Last Thousand Years*, which hit the market in 1995. He saw neither Asia nor East Asia as separate geographic units, but instead distinguished between the Asian continental states China and India on the one hand and the coastal or island states on the other, above all Japan. Fernández-Armesto was convinced that the short domination by the Atlantic area was over, and was being succeeded by a period where Japan, California and the rest of “the Pacific Rim” would dominate the world. With his millennial perspective he had, of course, to go further than the 21st century in his predictions. He guessed that the domination of the Pacific rim states would last even shorter than that of the Atlantic states had done. The museum guards of a distant future would according to him see the three centuries from 1800 to 2100 as an exceptional period where the rim states interrupted the normal position of China as the centre of the world.

It is interesting to see how Paul Kennedy’s writings reflect the changing trends of the 1990s. In 1988 he published *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. This was at the end of a century when the USA had been in economic trouble, while Japan continued to grow. The book’s last chapter was dedicated to a critical analysis of the USA as “number one in

relative decline.” In a classical way the superpower seemed to have become victim of imperial overstretch, committing more resources than it had at its disposal. Even though Paul Kennedy was cautious with his statements and mentioned both the European Union as China as candidates to take over the US lead, it was clear that his main candidate was Japan. This provoked intense debates in the USA, and discrete satisfaction in Tokyo. As soon as the debate died down, the Japanese economy stagnated, while the USA entered a period of persistent economic growth and impressive job creation. The comparison between the USA and Japan then lost relevance, and instead the world and Kennedy discovered the dramatic growth which was going on in other East Asian countries. Kennedy’s next book, *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century*, was written in the wake of the World Bank’s Asian miracle report. Kennedy again paid some attention to the future plans of Japan, but this time dedicated a whole chapter to the populous states China and India, and another chapter to explaining why developing states in Asia were so much more successful than developing states elsewhere in the world. He gave five reasons: emphasis on education, high savings rates, strong political frameworks, export orientation, and the Japanese model. He did not explicitly predict an Asian century, but it was clear that he saw China, other East Asian countries, and also India, as having the greatest potential for catching up with the West. After the outbreak of the Asian Crisis, in 1998, the world had again changed, and Kennedy again made his views known. This time he published an article with the title: “The Next American Century?,” and concluded: “Undoubtedly, the United States of America has had more influence upon our world over the past 100 years than any other country, and to that extent this century may be termed, in shorthand, “America’s,” even more than the sixteenth century seemed to be Spain’s, the eighteenth France’s, and the nineteenth Britain’s. There is equally little doubt that the United States will enter the twenty-first century as the world’s number-one power. But whether it will continue to be so into and through the next century is open to question” (Kennedy 1999: 58). Cautious as always, but the direction of Kennedy’s cautious predictions changed with the times. At the beginning of the decade, he hinted at Japanese dominance, at mid-century a broader Asian hegemony, while in 1999 he claimed that “by choosing intelligent policies,” the United States “could stay at the top for many years to come” (Kennedy 1999: 58). It should be noted that each time Kennedy changed his mind, it was not because of new historical insights. It was due to the current trends.

The fourth category are Asia’s own Asianists: Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia, the

¹⁰ *Framtid med Asien: Förslag till en svensk Asienstrategi*. Stockholm: Regeringskansliet, Utredningsdepartementet, Ds 1998: 61, s. 49.

Singaporean state intellectual Kishore Mahbubani, and the parallel figure in Malaysia, Noordin Sopie. It is no coincidence that Singapore and Malaysia were in the forefront of promoting "Asian Values" and that they embraced the concept of "The Asian Century" with such enthusiasm. They are both small multi-ethnic states, with both Chinese, Indian and Muslim Malay communities. Both internally and in their external commercial and political relations they therefore depend on Asian stability, preferably undisturbed by intrusive, liberalising westerners.

To demonstrate that their Asianism is not just a whim of the top leaders, let us here take Anwar Ibrahim as the first example, the former finance and deputy prime minister who is now in prison, accused of corruption and sodomy, and seen in the West as a liberal alternative to Mahathir. In 1996, a year before he fell from grace, Anwar published his own Asianist vision under the title *The Asian Renaissance*. The book should probably be seen as an expression of the Malaysian government's official philosophy at that time. Anwar conceded in the book that Asian diversity makes it difficult to speak of a strong Asian unity, but he thought the sense of unity would grow: "...by the middle of the next century, this sense of unity is likely to deepen and become more pervasive."¹¹ What could strengthen Asia's unity was a combination of support for ASEAN, the economic strength of East Asia, and solidarity in the non-aligned movement and other similar groupings. Such Asian unity would achieve strong influence, particularly in a time of Western decay. Anwar found clear signs of Western decay in the ideological field. The philosophical basis for the hegemony of Europe and the Atlantic area had according to Anwar been "the totalitarian concept of modernity," and this concept was now under strong attacks from multiculturalism and postmodernism: "In the history of civilizations, once the ideational foundation of a civilization is undermined, its fate is sealed." It is not known if Anwar has changed his mind on this point, after his arrest.¹¹

The most active of the Asianist ideologues in the first half of the 1990s was Dr. Noordin Sopie, the Director-General of the Institute for Strategic and International Studies in Kuala Lumpur. John Naisbitt thanked him profusely in his *Megatrends Asia*. Noordin Sopie initiated a Commission for a New Asia, with members from many Asian and some non-Asian countries, which published the booklet *Towards a New Asia* in 1994. In the preface he declared that the ideas for an Asian Renaissance would "flow with the tide of Asian resurgence that has already begun. There will be the return of history—to the times when Asia was the

¹¹ Another indication of the Malaysian attitude was given when the opposition leader of the Democratic Action Party, Mr. Lim Kiet Sing, in September 1999 protested against the Australian prime minister's proposal that Australia should serve as the US deputy in Asia. Lim's comment was based on the assumption of an "Asia" with a shared view: "Asia does not want, nor has it recognised, the US as the policeman of the world, nor does it want a deputy" (*South China Morning Post*, 25.9.99).

cradle of human civilisation." The Commission noted that "impossible" things had already been done. Asia had been the home of "many of the miracles of the twentieth century." And "If our enormous synergies can be collectively harnessed, there is little doubt that Asia will become the economic centre of the 21st century." The report had a deeply moral tone. Asia could only succeed by sticking to "the social mores of the traditional Asian village."

The fifth and last category is perhaps not a category at all since it consists of only by one man, but since he is a prominent former tiersmondist theoretician, his transformation to Asianism may perhaps be indicative of a trend. André Gunder Frank published his book *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* only in 1998, after the Asian Crisis had interrupted the general flow of Asianist discourse, but the book was conceived and written during the age of "The Asian Century." The basic premise in Gunder Frank's book is the dichotomy between Asia and the West. To this dichotomy he adds a third category, called "the Rest" (a term somewhat reminiscent of his former main category: "The Third World"). Gunder Frank dismisses the role of technological innovation as a causal factor in development, and does not assign importance to the global integration process of the last two hundred years. In his view there has been for many centuries a globally integrated economic system in which Asia has normally dominated. Only because of very special circumstances in the years around 1800 did the West achieve a temporary hegemony in the 19th and 20th centuries. These special circumstances had nothing to do with Western culture, the European political structure or with the invention of the steam engine or other technological achievements. The causes of the temporary Western hegemony were, firstly, that Asia (China and India) at that time experienced one of their cyclic downturns and, secondly, that Europeans for a long time had been able to buy Asian commodities with gold and silver they had robbed in the Americas and, thirdly, that the English labour force had become so scarce and expensive that it was profitable to introduce industrial techniques in the production of textiles for the global market. The technology was there for anyone to use, but only in England was labour so expensive that it was profitable to actually make use of it.

Thus, Western domination in the 19th and 20th centuries was a historical accident, and it will soon be over. Gunder Frank's construct forms a kind of historical rationale for channelling the world historical river back to its normal, predominantly Eastern, course.¹² It is a nice and

¹² An illuminating debate about Gunder Frank's book, as well as David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (also 1998) can be found in *Itineraria*, vol. XXII, 3/98 and 4/98, and vol. XXIII, no. 1/99.

provocative thesis, and it is also a little bit tempting to embrace it for anti-Eurocentric westerners. The only problem with it is that it does not hold water. Western domination in the 19th and 20th centuries was not just an accident caused by special circumstances around 1800. Its roots must be sought in European economic, social, political and cultural developments well before 1800. Moreover, the world market today is infinitely more integrated than it was before 1800. At that time it was still possible for an area or kingdom to both flourish and be fairly isolated. Today this is impossible. Prosperity can only be achieved through successful interaction with the global market.

As will be seen from the above, there were many different groups who joined the bandwagon of “The Asian Century” discourse, with a whole range of different motives. Business gurus tried to make money on the prospects for a rapidly growing Asian market; a search on the internet reveals a number of hotels and other companies with “Pacific Century” in their name. Development banks and donor agencies wanted to promote the East Asian example as an example of development, to hold up against the dismal experiences in Africa and other parts of what used to be called “The Third World.” World historians used the rise of Asia as a way to relativise the last two centuries’ western hegemony and show that the future could be very different indeed. Asia’s own Asianists used the idea of an “Asian Century” to boost their programmes for achieving Asian solidarity in defending authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes against the onslaught of west-oriented liberalisers. And André Gunder-Frank sought refuge in the idea of Asia after the demise of “The Third World.”

There is something to be learned from this about the interplay between current trends and historical rationalisations built on contemporary motivations.

Do Centuries at all Belong to Regions?

The final question to be asked here is if it makes sense at all to attribute certain centuries or historical periods to particular continents or regions. Perhaps the whole method of periodisation used in William H. McNeill’s *The Rise of the West* is flawed. In a way he replaced the normal Eurocentric western version of world history with a Mediterranean-centred version of the 500 BC–200 AD period, an Indo-centred version of the years 200–600, an Islamic-centred account of the centuries 600–1000, a Sino-centred narrative for the years 1000–1500, while the post-1500 period remained Euro- and Atlantic-centred. The book suited the needs of the 1960s, when there was a demand for a historical rationale for the role

of the USA as the leading power within the Western civilisation, with global responsibilities.

Samuel Huntington’s book *The Clash of Civilisations*, and also David Landes’ long fascinating essay from 1998, with a title inspired by Adam Smith: *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor*, both follow, in a way, in the tradition from William H. McNeill. They form the Western antidotes to “The Asian Century” discourse. Huntington launches a programme for defending unique Western values. Landes emphasises the Western contribution to world historical progress: “Until very recently, over the thousand and more years of this process that most people look upon as progress, the key factor—the driving force—has been Western civilization and its dissemination: the knowledge, the techniques, the political and social ideologies, for better or worse.” (Landes 1998: 513). Landes’ main explanation for progress is culture, the culture of hard work and technological innovation. In the view of Landes it is impossible to make predictions about the future without basing them on an evaluation of culture. He does not seem sure that the West will be able to preserve its basic cultural values, and asks: “Will this be the East Asian century?” (Landes 1998: 518). He does not answer the question, but between the lines is a fear that some East Asian nations are now taking over the West’s main characteristics: hard work, education and ingenuity.

What the defenders of Western values and the proponents of “The Asian Century” have in common, and that I would like to question here, is the basic distinction between West and East. The most immediate counter-argument to this distinction is that Asia is so big. All of Asia cannot dominate at the same time, but if the 21st century is attributed only to East Asia and not to all of Asia, some of the figures used to argue the case, notably the demographic ones, must be revised downwards.

Another, more interesting, counter-argument is that the world today, and also—albeit to a lesser extent—in the past, is better understood as a total system of networks and institutions than as an East and a West, a few distinct civilisations, or an Atlantic and a Pacific area. Alongside all the contributions to the Western and Asian values discourses the 1990s also saw the publication of a great number of publications that sought global patterns and explanations, and who refuted the idea of divisions between regions. A key concept in world political debates was “globalisation,” a concept that should be seen as a rival to the main concepts discussed above.

The most noted contributions to the literature in support of globalisation have been liberal in nature. Francis Fukuyama set much of the agenda with his two books *The End of History and the Last Man* and *Trust* which were published in 1992 and 1995. He claimed the whole

world was heading for a shared, liberal system, and that the history of ideological conflicts was over.¹³ A similar globalising vision can be seen from the subtitle of Christopher Lingle's anti-Asianist polemic book from 1997 (published just as the Asian Crisis struck): *The Rise & Decline of the Asian Century: False Starts on the Path to the Global Millennium*. He proposes "The Global Millennium" as an alternative to the false idea of "The Asian Century." Lingle's book is not intellectually innovative, but is based on a crude, simplistic liberalism. Still it is interesting for two main reasons. Firstly, it is the only book devoted to a criticism of "The Asian Century" discourse. Secondly, it predicted the Asian Crisis and launched a broad attack on Asian crony capitalism—before everyone else did the same.

The Asian Crisis put at least a temporary end to the talk about "The Asian" and "The Pacific Century," but now that most of the crisis seems to be over, and several East Asian economies are once more growing rapidly, the discourse may turn up again. There is at present a basic conflict between protagonists of further liberalising reform and proponents of a degree of state control and interventionism, and this conflict is linked to the debate between proponents of humanitarian interventions and defenders of national sovereignty. These conflicts may provide basis for continued debates between those who think the world still consists of separate civilisations and those defending the thesis of a global world with basic common values. And the writing of world history cannot avoid being influenced by these debates. It will continue to be written from both the global and the civilisational angle. The choice is ours.

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¹³ "...the current liberal revolution... constitutes further evidence that there is a fundamental process at work that dictates a common evolutionary pattern for all human societies—in short, something like a Universal History of mankind in the direction of liberal democracy." Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, s. 48.

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