

# Asia is Rising—But Where is it Going?

## Thoughts on an Emergent Discourse

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I am grateful to the organisers of the Convention, especially Prof. Tak-Wing Ngo, for the gracious invitation to deliver this keynote address. It is a great honour. It is also a challenge. To speak to a diffuse, complicated and broad discourse such as ‘the rise of Asia’ requires a grasp of continental spaces and their concrete details that is far beyond my competence. To do so in the presence of experts many of whom are also inhabitants of those spaces presents additional complications in the diversity of political and cultural sensibilities, as well as the different sets of problems that confront scholars in their various disciplinary and regional specialisations. I hope I am forgiven if my discussion seems too much to be in the thrall of the rise of China, which may be unavoidable given my own disciplinary affiliation. In the present context, it may be an advantage as it is China’s ‘great leap’ over the last two decades that drives the discourse, and endows it with a new significance.

I use ‘discourse’ here advisedly: not as a globally ratified and systematically elaborated interlocution but a way of speaking and thinking about Asia that in its drift creates a powerful discourse-effect. This is all the more reason for taking it seriously, but also

critically. I will restrict myself here to some questions of continental scope and significance that I take to be of fundamental importance and urgency, with an eye on intra-continental differences and extra-continental relationships. These questions pertain to the spatial and temporal implications of the discourse, and what it has to say about the consequences of Asian development, as well as what it is largely silent about. They are provoked by phenomena that are the subject of everyday news, scholarly discussion, political attention, and even hot and cold military activity. Their importance for societies in Asia and globally is commonly acknowledged. Yet the discourse goes on, sort of to speak, celebrated by some, viewed by others with suspicion and trepidation. We need to ask, ultimately: is the discourse itself the problem? This is the question that guides my discussion.

The question in the title of this discussion is intended not as a promise of clairvoyance but as a call for closer attention to the implications of a striking dissonance in the current discourse on Asian development: widespread apprehension about the future that haunts the celebration of the present. The dissonance is readily visible in work by commentators from the region as well as outside of it.

Led by the People’s Republic of China in the East, accompanied by India in the South, Turkey in the West and oil-rich Kazakhstan in Central Asia, celebrations of development in societies across the length and breadth of ‘Asia’ inspire prognostications of one or another version of an impending ‘Asian century’. Unlike in the earlier cases of Japan and the ‘miracle’ economies of eastern Asia that developed under United States hegemony, this most recent cycle of development

promises to re-center the world economy in Asia—read, China—bringing an end to two centuries of marginalisation in a world dominated by Europe and the United States.

Just as commonly, these celebrations are qualified in even the most optimistic analyses by sober acknowledgments of deep national and international problems created by the very same development that point to an uncertain future, if not a potentially disastrous one—for Asia, and the globe as a whole. How an ‘Asian century’ might be configured in terms of power relations, moreover, is hotly contested in nationalist ideologies and visions not just without but within Asia.

When these conflicting assessments are not simply dissolved into the hype over ‘Asia rising’, however, they are bracketed as responses to passing distortions, likely to go away in some unspecified future with more development. What refuses to go away are the anxieties that burden the hopes, and for good reason. Unprecedented inequality and inability to address urgent ecological issues in so-called developed countries, not to speak of a profusion of less dramatic problems they suffer from, leaves little room for faith in the evolutionary promises of global capitalism. There is every indication that as products of historical forces reinforced in their relocation within a global modernity dominated by the political economy of capitalism, these developmental problems are not likely to be resolved with the thinking that created them in the first place—a promise that developmentalist hype upholds despite accumulating evidence of serious problems. Empowered by dizzying transformations that have heated up what has become a virtual race into an unpredictable future, and dear nevertheless to the faithful who have been its beneficiaries, the fetishism of development commands such global ideological hegemony that it pushes beyond the pale solutions not in keeping with its norms or aspirations—perhaps more so in Asia than elsewhere. In the process, the seemingly innocent language of development disguises its fundamental premise that development is not just about developing, but developing within the parameters of the capitalist world economy. It is also silent on how the ominous signs of the present might play out in a future that is its product.

The discourse on ‘Asia rising’ is a discourse about Asia. Less apparently, it is also a discourse

about global capitalism: Asia as the success story of the global neoliberal economy. The rise of China which fuels the discourse is contemporaneous with the ascendancy of neoliberalism, and despite the insistence on a ‘socialist market economy’, has been a force in validating its assumptions (Harvey, 2005). Asia as the realm of backwardness and subsequently of revolution is represented presently as the promise of the endless possibilities of capitalism. But the discourse is at one with its predecessors in homogenising Asian spaces and temporalities against striking evidence of the uneven development of societies in the region in their entanglement with global capitalism, which is constitutive both of efforts to define ‘Asia’, and of the relationship of Asian societies to one another. The reification of Asia seeks to turn the tables on an earlier hegemonic relationship with Euro/America, at the extreme by an insistence on ‘Asia for Asians’. But it does so at the cost of reproducing a cartographic reification that throws an ideological cover over deep divisions over the meaning of ‘Asia’ and its possible future, struggles within and without for hegemony, and proliferating problems some of the most intractable of which are traceable to the enthusiastic embrace of the developmentalist promises of unbridled global capitalism behind the disguise of Asian difference.

The space designated as ‘Asia’ all along has consisted of a multiplicity of spaces, and historically shifting spatialities under the force of changing configurations of transcontinental economic and political relationships. It is subject, presently, to the dynamics of global capitalism that is in the process of reconfiguring these relationships, empowering new sources of hegemony, and stimulating efforts to reinvent ‘Asia’. By the same token, confronting problems created by development calls for the imagination of spaces that answer to human needs rather than the logic of economic and political power. Overcoming the spatial mystification of ‘Asia’ is a crucial first step to this end to which we as scholars may make some small contribution.

### ASIA ON OUR MINDS

Critical engagement of the discourse must begin with the idea of ‘Asia’ itself. An international relations text published in 2011 in the United States begins

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with the observation that while at the end of World War II, ‘Asia was not much more than a Western geographical expression’, sixty years later, ‘even if Asia lagged far behind Europe in developing regional bodies, it had progressed far from being a mere geographical expression. It had become Asia, a region with a sense of identity, growing self-confidence, and a record of dynamic economic growth that prompted many to dub the new century the ‘Asian century’. (Miller and Which, 2011, pp. 1, 275)

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Evidence of this transformation is overwhelming. Intra-Asian trade and production networks are integrating nations across the breadth of the continent while regional organisations such as ASEAN and SCO are expanding their membership, giving some political form to this economic integration.<sup>1</sup> Migrant networks are giving birth to transnational social spaces the presence of which is more readily acknowledged than in earlier times, especially for elites—a byproduct of forces of globalisation. Equally important is the intensification of an Asia-consciousness, if not an incipient pan-Asianism. Asians are curious about one another. Whereas only a decade ago Asian intellectuals displayed little interest in one another, there is a rapid proliferation of interactions and efforts to find out about other Asians, which is clearly visible especially in societies that have registered significant economic advances over the recent decade: the People’s Republic of China, India and Turkey. There is clearly an Asian cultural market in music and film, reinforced by the internet. There are grassroots efforts as exemplified by such publications as *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *Asian Review of World Histories*, or the ARENA (Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives) and

*minjianchindia* networks. A recent work by the Indian writer Pankaj Mishra sees parallels between the present and the birth of an Asia-consciousness in the pan-Asian movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Mishra, 2012). It may easily be imagined that with these interactions and the knowledge they produce, Asians in the near future will be less dependent on US and European sources for their understanding of one another, which has been the case in the past two centuries.

It is not quite correct to say that a sense of Asia did not exist earlier, although why the authors cited above may think so is interesting. I will say more about that below.<sup>2</sup> Nascent pan-Asian consciousness at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a source of inspiration in the growth of radical nationalist movements against colonialism and imperialism, as well as the possibility of rejuvenating native legacies (Karl, 2002; Aydin, 2007; Esenbel, 2004). The search for Asian paths to development was a concern from the beginnings of political and economic modernisation. At least on a regional basis, a sense of Asian solidarity was possibly also a factor in reinforcing solidarity among anarchist and Marxist revolutionaries committed to internationalism in anti-colonial movements (Dirlik, 2005; Hwang, 2010). For some radicals, among others, even the intra-Asian imperialism of the Japanese Empire seemed to be an acceptable alternative to ‘Western’ imperialism in its pan-Asian rhetoric (Hwang, 1999). In the immediate aftermath of decolonisation after World War II, pan-Asian solidarity would be reconfirmed at the Bandung Conference of 1955, albeit within a broader framework of tricontinental solidarity that included nations of Africa, South America and the Caribbean ‘non-aligned’ with the Cold War protagonists, the United States and the Soviet Union (Lee, 2010).

Contemporary Asia-consciousness is in part heir to this legacy of pan-Asianism. Pan-Asianism may be an elusive goal, but its traces persist in a sense of being Asian, at least as an abstraction. I will illustrate this with a personal anecdote. In the fall of 1983, on my first visit to Beijing, I was hiking in the suburbs in the Huayuancun area one day, when I encountered an elderly gentlemen accompanied by his grandson, with a simple seemingly home-made rifle slung over his shoulder. As we exchanged pleasantries, he asked me where I was from. I said the US, and added that I was originally from Turkey. What impressed him

was the latter. He broke into a smile, and with a conspiratorial wink, blurted out: ‘We Asians are smart. These foreigners don’t understand anything’.

When we speak of ‘Asia-consciousness’ as an ideological and sentimental presence, the shared past of struggles against a ‘Western’-imposed colonial order is not to be ignored.<sup>3</sup> It is invoked as the basis for a new solidarity in diplomatic negotiation as well as intellectual work, of which Mishra’s own work is exemplary. It is also arguable that the consciousness is presently founded upon a more solid basis. Whereas earlier pan-Asianists owed their inspiration and fleeting solidarity to perceptions of common problems *vis-à-vis* ‘Western’ imperialism, present-day Asia is marked by far more effective market integration and cultural communication, which contribute to the sense of a shared fate.

The possibility of identifying an ‘Asia’ that may be separated out from its global context as economic, political and cultural space is a basic premise of the discourse, past and present.<sup>4</sup> The persistence of the past—and the European Orientalist cartographic imagination—may be most cogently visible in the continued prevalence of an East-West conceptualisation of the world that underlines the division between Asia and Euro/America. It is the guiding theme of Mishra’s disquisition. The Singaporean diplomat-intellectual Kishore Mahbubani has gone even further to identify East and West with distinctive world-views.<sup>5</sup> It is freely used by Chinese leaders and intellectuals, more often than not with China substituted for Asia. I suspect it is common to the spatialization of the world across the breadth of Asia, from Turkey to Japan.

The continuity, however, is also misleading. Pan-Asianism at the turn of the century took over a distinction established by a hegemonic European mapping of the world, and made it the basis for Asian solidarity. The commonality it imagined was a product of shared weakness: from the Sick Man of West Asia at one end, to the Sick Man of East Asia at the other. Asian spirituality set against ‘Western’ materialism provided some comfort, without alleviating a sense of impending doom.

Contemporary commonality is heir to the same legacy of European Orientalist mapping of Eurasia. On the other hand, it establishes itself on a sense of shared resurgence backed by material power. It is not a warning of extinction but an announcement of arrival.

If it still boasts of its spirituality, it is now more akin to the ‘spiritual atom bomb’ that Mao Zedong discovered in the consciousness of the people. With contemporary communications, the sense of a shared space is available to a far larger constituency, making Mao’s metaphor more relevant. These differences from the past are important for thinking out issues of Asian solidarity as well as Asia as space in the global system.

The metaphor of East and West provides a convenient illustration of problems of Asian commonality and solidarity, as well as of Asia as global space. Despite its commonly recognised reductionist banality, this metaphor refuses to go away, perhaps because it offers a pithy invitation, attractive in its verbal economy, to imaginary realms of material and cultural exotics and riches that each side dreams of the other. Simultaneously but contrarily, it offers a seemingly plausible cultural map upon which to write out mutual anxieties and antagonisms—as it did during the Cold War, when ‘East’ meant the realm of Communism and ‘West’ that of ‘democracy’ (not capitalism). It has now been restored to its continental dimension, but with similar anxieties if not overt antagonisms. In either case, the juxtaposition reifies and distances the two entities to which it refers, and overwhelms the complex relationships within and without for which it becomes a formulaic (and static) stand-in. It is not merely academic but deeply political and cultural in its implications.

The prevalence in the discourse on Asia of an Asia/Europe or an East-West juxtaposition (the subject-matter here) is the product of an intensified Asia-consciousness both within and without ‘Asia’. In the case of the former, it gives expression to a persuasive effort to carve out an ‘Asian’ political and cultural space to overcome Euro/American domination and hegemony. In its current rebirth, the discourse on Asia aspires once again to modernities that Asians can call their own, which has never disappeared since its appearance in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It has been the substance of much discussion in recent years, both East and West. The juxtaposition divides but also unifies Asia and Europe (or ‘the West’) as contenders in the construction of modernity or modernities. Asia is privileged along with Europe as a source of modernities, with equal claims on modernity but on differing tacks. This certainly is welcome news in Asia though it may not be elsewhere—especially continents

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and civilisations that are left out, depending on how Asia is delineated.

What makes the discourse problematic is an age-old question: what exactly is Asia beyond a geographical designation, and a very troubled one at that. Not to speak of unity or homogeneity, an ‘Asia’ that is a recognisably coherent bounded space exists only in ideological imagination.<sup>6</sup> Despite strenuous efforts to render it coherent, the idea of Asia seems less plausible than ever before with the globalisation of development. Indeed, as was the case with the earlier Eurocentric conceptualisation, it is not a demonstrable difference along some boundary that produces the distinction between Asia and Euro/America, or the East and the West, but the other way around: the self-conception or the desire for difference that establishes the boundary between the two entities so named—no less for Euro/Americans than for those who would self-identify as Asians. Not very surprisingly, as our contemporary notions of the globe are products of a Eurocentric geography.

It takes but brief reflection to be reminded that East and West are directional terms rendered into static locations, which is what makes them as metaphors. Perhaps because I grew up in a city divided by a narrow strip of water one side of which was in Europe and the other in Asia, the usage has always struck me as an odd one. The oddity has been confirmed over the years by my discovery of many places to the east of where I grew up that claimed to be meeting points of East and West—some of them at the very eastern end of the continent. If there were so many easts and so many wests, what could the terms refer to, and contain?

The answer is obvious. The terms do not refer just to directions, or to the many different easts and wests that come together in particular places. They are informed by a discourse, by now global, that rendered the east into a stand-in for Asia, and the west into another word for Europe or Euro/America. That, of course, presupposed a prior separation of Eurasia from the Afro-Eurasian ecumene, followed by its breakdown into Asia and Europe as geographical units, a separation that was not physical but the product of a cultural(or should I say, culturalist?) operation. It is revealing that by contrast, Europe and the Americas, physically separated by an ocean, are nevertheless united culturally in the term ‘west’ by a reverse cultural operation.

I need not belabor here the problems that arise for ideas of Europe and Asia (as well as other continental units of our political geography) when east and west are restored to their more proper directional sense. One immediate consequence is that it does indeed become possible to have many locations for the meeting of east and west, if not of Europe and Asia. As historians of geography have demonstrated, these terms have been marked by a serious instability of reference since their origins. A crucial consequence was the invention of a ‘middle east’ to account for the serious differences between ‘Asia proper’ and a predominantly Islamic region, itself subject to shifting boundaries. Northern Asia, including Russia, is left out of most serious discussions of Asia. On occasion, India has been removed from the space so designated.<sup>7</sup> It is not uncommon, both within and without Asia, to encounter the identification of Asia with only one national entity, more often than not, China.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, relationships of power and perceptions of what constitutes ‘Asianness’ have something to do with the configurations of geography, and render it variable and prone to fragmentation.<sup>9</sup>

This is quite clear in the case of a country like Turkey, which sits astride Europe and Asia, as it were. Turks as an ethnic group have central Asian origins, but Turkey is also heir to the Ottoman Empire which for centuries claimed hegemony over the Islamic world of Western Asia and North Africa. Nevertheless, the East-West distinction is quite clear in the Turkish self-image. Since the founding of the Republic in 1923 under the leadership of Kemal Atatürk, Turkey has spent the better part of a century trying ‘to escape from Asia’, much like Japan at the other end of the continent. The resurgence of Islam in Turkish politics since the 1990s has once again complicated matters. The Islamic government has good ideological reasons for once again looking east. But it is not the only version of the ‘East’, as it is challenged by a Pan-Turkist or Pan-Turanian right that identifies the East more with central Asian origins than with the Islamic world. And both have to contend with the secularist pro-‘Western’ legacies of Atatürk which by no means have lost their continued appeal. The Islamic government itself is still very much taken with Turkey’s admission into the European Union, which to most Turks continues to represent the ultimate test of arrival in the ‘civilised’ world. Whatever affinity Turkey’s Islamists may feel for other Muslims or Asians, ‘looking

east’, or moves to link up with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or ASEAN, are very much entangled in political maneuvers to also become a more integral part of Europe (Beukman, 2013; Gursel, 2013).

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With national identities in question, it should not be difficult to imagine the magnitude of the problem when it comes to continental identities. The problem is not just ‘Asian’, it is also ‘European’.<sup>10</sup> There is, of course, no self-evident reason why the present should be beholden to the imperial geographies of Euromodernity. Intensifying economic relations across Asia—from Pacific Asia to the ‘Middle East’—may be responsible for a new sense of ‘Asianness’, but surely these relationships do not stop at the Nile or the Bosphorus. For centuries, religious, commercial and even political activity over the continental spaces and oceans of Afro-Eurasia were conducted without an awareness of crossing continental boundaries or defining continental spaces.<sup>11</sup> It is a tribute to the continued hegemonic power of Euromodernity that an age marked by the self-conscious pursuit of globalisation should fetishise the continental identities established by its imperial geographies.

The discourse informed by the triple parallelisms of Asia/Europe—East/West—Orient/ Occident is so powerful that even critically-informed and well-intentioned scholars speak on its terms. I hope the organisers will not take it amiss if I refer here to the website for this conference, which describes our present location as an ‘East-West Crossroads’. Macao is certainly a crossroads, but it is both much less and much more than the East-West metaphor suggests. It is a product not just of one east or one west but many easts and many wests which identify its locus as a cross-roads, and

define the particularities that differentiate it from other such cross-roads, say Hong Kong in the neighborhood which also advertises itself as a meeting point between the East and the West.

But our present location, taken somewhat more literally, is also much more than a specific point in space different from other such points. The venue for the conference is a hotel that is part of a global entertainment corporation that spans two continents (and east and west) and a number of such points: Las Vegas, Macao and Singapore which, with all their differences, are bound together by this global chain that also endow them with commonalities that transcend their locations and differences. To use the vocabulary of spatial analysis, they are places encompassed—and shaped—by a trans-place spatial organisation and culture. This culture is not free of other associations, both economic and political. It is the entertainment face of the culture of global capitalism. In this particular case it also derives its political orientation from a Chairman and CEO who is an ardent supporter of the Republican Party and pro-Israel positions in US politics. Our presence here does not make us into supporters of these causes. That is not my point. My point is that factoring these elements into the determination of Macao as place makes Macao into a very different—and much more complicated—place in global positioning than is allowed for in an abbreviated east-west formulation. Like other locations that claim an abridged east-west location, Macao is ultimately a manifest product of the many easts and many wests—global processes—that crisscross it, while stamping on those processes a configuration that defines its particularity and identity.

## ASIA: FRAGMENTED AND GLOBAL

In his study of the reception given to the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore in China and Japan in the 1920s and 1930s published four decades ago, entitled *Asian Ideas of East and West*, Stephen Hay argued that pan-Asianism had been subject all along to national perceptions and interests (Hay, 1970). The values claimed to represent the values of a distinctive Asian culture are found upon closer inspection to be projections upon Asia of a variety of national cultures, themselves abstractions by elites from localised differences. Even at a level of generality such as



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‘spiritual Asia’, the evidence of difference in everyday life behavior and values contradicts the notion of an Asian culture with its suggestion of commonality which at some level or another suggests homogeneity or at least shared values of determinant significance across continental spaces (as it does also with the other aspect of the relationship, Europe or Euro/America or simply, the West).

Difference does not rule out solidarity. Indeed, active recognition of difference is a feature of grassroots efforts to construct an Asia-consciousness as it is of contemporary intellectual movements elsewhere. The ‘movements project’ of which the periodical *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* is an issue is a case in point. Such efforts not only display a keen sense of difference, they also welcome it. What shared values there may be are moreover over-determined by values derived from Euromodernity that make for substantial differences. Asia-consciousness in these cases is a process of discovery—and invention—that seeks social reconstruction as the basis for a new consciousness.

It is equally also evident that whatever commonalities there may be, they are easily trumped by considerations of national wealth and power, rendering the construction of an Asia-consciousness highly problematic, if not unlikely. Development has introduced new dimensions to the fissiparous tendencies of the past, undermining possibilities of Asian solidarity. It also has integrated Asian societies more closely into global capitalism, making it more difficult than ever before to speak of Asia as any kind of self-contained space.

There is little need here to dwell on the political and economic issues that presently divide Asian societies, in some cases leading to overt conflict or the threat of it. Some but not all of these conflicts are the work of outsiders to Asia, notably, the United States. If we adopt the most expansive and inclusive idea of Asia, going back to the ancient Greeks, as everything east of the Aegean Sea and the Nile River, there is irresolvable difference and ongoing conflict everywhere: civil war in Iraq and Syria, Palestinian struggles against an apartheid regime, Kurdish struggles for autonomy, war in Afghanistan, antagonism between India and Pakistan with Kashmir as the flash-point, Tibetan and Uighur struggles for autonomy, seemingly irresolvable issues (at least peacefully) in the relationship of Taiwan to the PRC, and the divided Koreas, and most recently

militarisation and the threat of conflict in Eastern Asia, triggered by an expansionist China seeking to reclaim the tributary territories of its imperial predecessors—and then some.<sup>12</sup> While some of this conflict is traceable to legacies of the past, present day competition for power and resources generates its own conflicts or exacerbates existing ones.<sup>13</sup> Especially virulent is anxiety about resources, including food and water. In either case, the construction of an Asia-consciousness is overshadowed by far by the effort required to contain these hostilities and conflict.

If the burdens of the past continue to haunt Asia, present development generates its own divisions in uneven development across and within national boundaries. Much of the hype about the rise of Asia is really about the rise of the People’s Republic of China, followed at some distance by India. ‘China’s rise’ was in important ways a product of its location in eastern Asia, which already by the 1970s had emerged as the third node of the capitalist world economy under the leadership of Japan, along with North America and Europe. With its rapid development over the last two decades, the PRC has established a dominant status in eastern Asia, and is in the process of extending its reach to southern and western Asia and into Africa. India is a serious contender, while in western Asia Turkey boasts a rapidly developing economy, and a modernity that is held up as a model for other predominantly Muslim societies. Given the highly advanced economies of the region (Japan and the one-time mini-dragons) and the size of the Chinese economy, the weight of the Asian economies is steeply tilted toward eastern Asia which is now home to the second and third-ranked economies in the world.

For all the success of some but not all eastern Asian societies, and of India and Turkey, most Asian societies are struggling with problems of poverty and modernity. Not that these are just problems of societies that have been less successful in their incorporation in capitalism. Uneven development internally is a major stumbling-block to China’s future development, and has led to even more tragic consequences in India where development has been more hesitant, and the poor do not enjoy some of the advantages revolutionary transformation brought to the rural areas of China. The two countries are among the poorest in the world in terms of per capita income. (Depending on the source, by income calculated in terms of purchasing power

parity, China ranks somewhere between 90<sup>th</sup> and 100<sup>th</sup> in the world, and India is further down between 120<sup>th</sup> and 130<sup>th</sup>).

China presently is one of the most unequal countries in the world. Official poverty figures aside, the so-called ‘middle class’ is huge by world standards, but constitutes only about 20 percent of the population, which is not much of a ‘middle’, and of that only a very small number enjoy the lavish life-styles that capture the headlines around the world. The divisions are a source of discontent, daily disturbance, and anxieties about the future. While India is nowhere close to China in inequality, it is plagued by problems of governance and a poor social and physical infrastructure. It is reported that every half hour an Indian peasant, unable to cope with burdens of debt and oppression, commits suicide. It, too, has its local insurrections, inspired by Maoism imported more than 40 years ago. Both countries suffer from massive corruption, which is a major source of distress among their populations. (For whatever it is worth, according to Transparency International’s Corruption Perception index, they are close to one another, somewhere in the middle of 176 countries ranked). The corruption is systemic, entangled in development policies that rely largely on unbridled plunder of resources and severe exploitation of the rural populations. This is especially the case in ‘socialist’ China where the state claims ownership of the land, and has few checks on the dispossession of its users under the banner of development. The plunder of rural land for industrialisation, urban development, and road construction for the new mobile society is accompanied by the conversion of dispossessed rural labor into a cheap and cruelly exploited army of labor—the so-called ‘peasant-workers’—that enabled the ‘take-off stage’ of Chinese capitalism; ‘accumulation by dispossession’, in the astute phrase by David Harvey (Harvey, 2003). It’s widely acknowledged even by the leadership that the plunder of the land and the abuse of the rural population is a major source of corruption, as well as popular discontent. Promises to resolve the question have so far led to little, as they have left unaddressed the problem of a mode of development premised upon those very conditions.<sup>14</sup>

The consequences are cultural as well as political. The ruling classes (and the ‘middle classes’) who have benefited from development are increasingly oriented to a global consumer and intellectual culture.

The majority, too, may aspire to this goal which is beyond their reach for reasons of poverty and unequal educational opportunities. There is good evidence in the spread of religious activity of a whole range that many seek solace in the realm of spirit what the material world denies them (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011). Uneven development, perpetuated by the plunder of the population by elites anxious to partake of the riches and cultures of global capitalism, is both politically and culturally divisive, with grave implications for the future.

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The internal differences and conflicts that qualify the idea of Asia as a geographical and cultural entity are matched in importance by integration in global economic, political, social and cultural networks which further call into question notions of Asia as a self-contained or coherent bounded entity—as I sought to illustrate above by the example of the over-determined space of our present location here at the Macao Venetian. The distinctions established by the parallel binaries—Asia/Europe, East/West, Orient/Occident—may be less tenable in our day than they ever have been in a history of shifting articulations of those terms, partly due to their incongruence with geopolitical and cultural realities but also motivated in part by changing relationships across Afro-Eurasia and beyond. If the search for ‘Asia’ inaugurated modern globalisation, contemporary globality is defined by the integration of Asian societies into global capitalism with consequences that are not merely economic but political, social and cultural as well. It is often overlooked that the contemporary discourse on Asia is at the same time a discourse on the expansion of the spaces of capital in Asian societies. Since the 1960s but especially since the ‘rise of China’ beginning in

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the 1990s, new frontiers of capital have opened up in Asian societies, which has given credence to the idea of globalisation—as well as the new discourse on the rise of Asia.

The narrative of global capitalism is integral to the discourse of ‘Asia rising’, just as the discourse of Asia rising perpetuates faith in the future of capitalist development, which no longer is identifiable with its birthplace in Europe, or its spectacular unfolding in North America. For all the implausible claims for native origins of success, Asia is the most recent success story of the millennial global expansion of the capitalist world economy. We will recall the Asia Pacific hype of the 1980s, which needs to be viewed in hindsight as the origin of the contemporary discourse on Asia. In an essay written at the time, the US anthropologist Donald Nonini used a concept proposed by David Harvey to describe the Asia Pacific—a euphemism itself for eastern Asia—as capital’s most recent ‘spatial fix’ (Nonini, 1993). The fix would subsequently settle on the People’s Republic of China which, as ‘the factory of the world’, is routinely acknowledged presently to be the motor force of global capitalist development. I think it is fair to say that in the eyes of the managers and promoters of capital, the rise of Asia is for the time being about the rise of China, which is readily acknowledged among Asian elites as well. Some among the Indian elite have begun to wonder if democracy is worth the price of India’s inability to match Chinese success.

Despite the persistence of socialist revolutionary rhetoric, on the other hand, it is equally evident that the narrative of ‘reform and opening’ initiated under Deng Xiaoping after 1978 in its substance is a story of China’s incorporation in global capitalism, and the crucial part it has played in China’s rise. For historical if no other reasons, there is much to be said for the denial of an intrinsic connection between capitalism and the market economy which is the premise of so-called ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. More to the point is the emergence of a corporate economy which has enabled the PRC to establish itself as an economic power. That this corporate economy is so far largely an instrument of state power does not make it any the less ‘capitalist’: state capitalism is no less capitalist for being bureaucratic and authoritarian, even if it is somewhat more threatening in the explicitness of the alliance between state and capital. Champions of global

capital never cease to complain about state controls that hinder access to the Chinese market and the unfair advantages of state-owned corporations, or predict PRC ‘socialism’s’ inevitable attenuation due to its inconsistencies with liberal market orthodoxy. But there is no shortage of praise for the efficient performance of the so-called ‘China model’, which invites admiration mixed with envy not just in developing societies but developed ones as well.

We need also to remember that in the realm of culture, the promotion of Asian culture and values first achieved recognition beginning in the late 1970s, coinciding with the increased prominence of eastern Asian economies, which with the exception of Japan were at the time still led by authoritarian regimes. Before that, these cultures and their values had been viewed as obstacles to development that awaited their inevitable doom with modernisation. Beginning with the Confucian revival in the early 1980s, so-called Asian values were re-valorized as sources of a new path of development. What is interesting is that the promotion of Asian values was a joint enterprise of political leaders and intellectuals from various eastern Asian societies, authorised and legitimised by prominent establishment intellectuals in the US. The collaboration continues to this day, exemplified most cogently by the willingness of academics and institutions around the world to participate in the Confucius institutes, now sponsored by the ‘socialist’ Chinese state. If present-day efforts to construct an Asian culture are likewise infused with the language of Euro/American cultural studies, Asian cultures and values have become a standard component of cultural circulation in a world where multiculturalism has become an unavoidable premise of economic transnationalism.

In a fundamental sense Asian societies had been culturally ‘globalised’ long before their cultures entered global circulation in a big way. The juxtaposition of East and West is perhaps most misleading presently in its suggestion that the entities so named might be strangers to one another, which, if it is the case at all, is more the case with Euro/Americans than with Asians. If ‘the West’ is Asia’s other, it is indeed a very intimate other, to borrow an adjective from the distinguished Indian intellectual Ashis Nandy. From political ideologies to everyday cultural practices, from intellectual discourses to esthetic values, from education to popular entertainment, and even to the most basic level of

kinship practices, Asian societies have been reconfigured under the impact of a Euromodernity powered by capitalism, the nation-form, and unprecedented technological forces unleashed by scientific knowledge. This is not to suggest erasure of received legacies or to deny the localisation of global forms, but only to recognise the importance of the global in the very resistance to it. Another distinguished Indian intellectual, this time the historian Sumit Sarkar, has written that ‘total concentration on the critique of colonial discourse is that only movements and aspects of life demonstrably free of...Western or rationalist taint can be given the status of authentic, properly indigenous protest, resistance and culture’ (Sarkar, 1996, p. 292). It is doubtful that such ‘purity’ is to be found even among those least touched by the age of iphones and the like.

Nevertheless, Sarkar’s protest points to an extremely important issue that often seems to escape notice: the erasure of ‘Westernised’ groups and aspects of society with the intensification of nativism, which draws strength from a global multiculturalism that has been ascendant during the same period. Where once native values and traditions were under assault in the name of modernity—Euromodernity—it is now ideas and cultural practices stamped with ‘Western’ origins—including democracy, equality, secularism and human rights—that have become cause for embarrassment in the quest for ‘alternative modernities’. It is hardly mentioned these days in ‘Communist’ China that Marxism is an import from Europe. The criticism of colonialism easily slides into nativist defense even when it is not so intended, as is the case with self-consciously radical efforts to reinvent Asia in conversation with global cultural transformations, that are otherwise fully cognisant of the new *habitus* that informs their discourse.

The difficulty of containing Asia within a definable space may be most evident in the social realm in migrations of Asian populations that has inspired the term, ‘global Asia’. Migrations that got under way in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have acquired unprecedented legitimacy and volume during this same period of ‘Asia’s rise’—due both to the proliferation of global linkages but also problems of survival created by development. Unlike earlier times, when migrants were expected to cut off their ties to places of origin (and their pasts), and assimilate to their new homes, it

has become nearly expected in the US and Europe for migrants to retain their ties to their original homelands, facilitated by new technologies, and establish their own social/cultural colonies in places of arrival, living in the security of the cultural practices they brought with them. Indeed, migrant populations such as Asian Americans who emerged to political visibility only 40 years ago in struggles to gain recognition as Americans, have undergone a reorientation to countries of origin in recent years in the new global social and cultural context. In some cases, members of migrant populations even take upon themselves the responsibility of representing their ‘native’ societies or cultures; as with a self-styled ‘Hindu Statesman’ in Nevada who appears in the news every time there is some slur or hint of it against Hinduism, or the Turkish associations who lobby with the US government on behalf of Turkey to refute suggestions of the ethnic cleansing of Armenians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century or the ongoing oppression of the Kurdish population. Asian migration, among others, is an important force in the increasing political and cultural incoherence of societies in Europe and North America even as they complicate notions of being Asian.

Asia is no longer just in Asia. While they may insist on retaining their own social and cultural legacies, migrant populations are subject to radical social and cultural transformation in their relocation in new political and cultural spaces. If they are still Asians by virtue of origins, their Asianness is reconfigured by their trajectories and experiences which inevitably distance them from those origins, and there is little reason to expect that they should conceptualise Asia in the same terms as those they left behind. If that is indeed the case, the proliferation of ways of being Asian that is a by-product of the globalisation of Asians would represent a further fragmentation of the idea of Asia itself in its globalisation.

AFTER THE REVOLUTION:  
NEOLIBERALISM AND THE DISCOURSE  
ON ASIA

The second issue I would like to take up pertains to the temporal implications of the current discourse on ‘the rise of Asia’. It is quite arguable that there is nothing particularly novel about the rise of Asia which has been rising for the past half century. So why all the

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fuss now? And why would a work such as the one with which I started my discussion proclaim that Asia has become Asia now?

The answer is in some ways obvious: the current rise is different from anything that went before as it has brought untold wealth and power to Asian societies like China, India and Turkey. The magnitude of the changes is such that the new ‘middle classes’ it has created sustain global consumption of everything from high-end perfumes to education. The changes have made these societies into lynch-pins of global capitalism, and the promise of its survival, while endowing them with a new status in global power. In the case of the People’s Republic of China, the rise has enabled a challenge to US unilateralism.

Against these changes it is easily forgotten as pre-history that a similar hype of Asia prevailed in the early 1980s with Japan and the mini-dragons leading the way—‘Japan as Number One’, as one US historian put it at the time. The preoccupation with China in East Asia has since nearly marginalised Japan as a spent power, even though it still happens to be the third most powerful country in the world economically, and commands immense technological power and a high standard of living.

There are more ways to understand the term ‘rise’ than that in its guise of success in a neoliberal globalising capitalism. Sharper in the contrast it presents is an earlier ‘rise’ of Asia in a revolutionary guise in the immediate aftermath of WWII. This earlier rise still does occasional lip service. The present celebrates it as the victory of national sovereignty against colonial domination and hegemony. But forgotten or degraded are the social aspirations that had been central goals of struggles for national liberation. Present efforts to revitalise native pasts bypass or explicitly reject the immediate socially radical, secularist, and revolutionary pasts. The repudiation of Mao Zedong in contemporary China is easily attributable to his revolutionary misdeeds, but it conveys a different significance when placed alongside the downgrading of the once sacrosanct Kemal Ataturk in Turkey (and the current assault in the Middle East on the military-secularist regimes), of the anti-developmentalism of Mahatma Gandhi or the socialist aspirations of India under Jawaharlal Nehru. These pasts are remembered as negative examples of how not to go about development.<sup>15</sup>

The conscious effort to erase revolutionary pasts in the neoliberal version of the rise is much more readily apparent if we go back to the origins of the contemporary discourse in the early eighties and the initial excitement occasioned by the rise of the so-called Confucian or neo-Confucian societies of eastern Asia. It was beginning then that the current discourse of rise first began to replace the earlier ‘rise’ of Asia as a location of revolutionary struggles against imperialism and colonialism, and a variety of searches for alternatives to capitalist modernity (to be distinguished from alternatives within capitalist modernity). China, of course, would be the most dramatic example of this turn with the ‘reform and opening’ after 1978, accompanied by an explicit rejection of the revolutionary path. It has since emerged to endow the discourse with renewed substance and significance.

If it is possible to speak of these transformations in the language of paradigm change, the significant transformation has been the replacement of Asia as a hothouse of revolutions and liberation struggles, given to the wrong-headed pursuit of some version of socialism or other, by Asia as the ultimate success story of neo-liberal globalisation. When the revolutionary past is invoked presently by elite commentators within or without Asia, it is as a reminder of the old days of poverty and powerlessness, and a warning against the threat of reversion to the bad old days with any deviation from the path of success. The revolutionary past is as much the ‘other’ of the contemporary discourse temporally as ‘the West’ is spatially and culturally. Indeed, the repudiation of the revolutionary past is a common cause on which the twain can meet despite the imaginary gap that otherwise divides them.

Claims to alternative modernities persist, but these are a far cry from the previous search for alternatives. Present-day claims to ‘alternative’ modernities are safely contained within a global capitalism, albeit with insistence on the possibility of local inflections (Dirlik, 2013). Capitalist development is in the process of transforming the physical, social and cultural topographies of Asian societies. Economic revitalisation has been accompanied by demands for the revitalisation of native cultural legacies. Claims to particularity in the name of indigenous historical legacies however, are contained by the demands of political economy in making sure that the past does not

interfere with the primary business of development, or the globalised life-style it promises.

While history may do useful service in claims to alternative modernities, its divisive consequences are equally important, and not so beneficial. History also appears in conflicts over sovereignty and territory that further threaten the idea of Asia. Such conflicts may be found across the breadth of Asia, but once again conflicts associated with development have been most conspicuous in China’s relations with its neighbors. From territorial claims at the borders with the Koreans to the borders with India in the Himalayas, from the East to the South China seas (ironically so named by Europeans), Chinese claims to territories that once fell within the tributary spaces of its imperial predecessors inevitably invoke history as alibi. Even though Chinese international relations scholars readily concede that national sovereignty was an idea imported from ‘the West’ in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these claims are expressed in the language of national sovereignty, at odds with the underlying premises of the tribute system—which may bear partial responsibility for puzzling uncertainties in Chinese foreign policy, caught between demands of an international order based on national sovereignty and the pull of memories of a sprawling tributary empire, but also willing to play by one or the other set of rules as it seems opportune. This time around, it needs to deal with political entities that also claim sovereignty. Whether or not these other nations would be willing to compromise their sovereignty in exchange for a market dependency remains to be seen. Indeed, many already seem to be caught between economic dependence on China and a perceived need for outside—US—support to contain expansionist Chinese claims on land and sea. Meanwhile, Asia is becoming militarised.

A SHIFT IN HEGEMONY?

When these issues are brought to the surface of the discourse, it is quite evident not only that ‘Asia rising’ suffers from the pitfalls of inherited orientalist or self-orientalizing discourses, but also that there is much to be apprehensive about what the ‘rise’ might promise: not just wealth and power, at least for some, but also increased possibility of inequality, social and international conflict, political turmoil, and last but by no means least, ecological destruction that is already taking a toll on the population and is global

in its implications. Celebratory forecasts of a middle class expanded to 700 million in China within a few decades is hardly ever placed within the context of what it would mean in terms of resources and environmental destruction on the basis of contemporary experience.<sup>16</sup> We may safely presume that present-day conflicts over resources are due at least in part to apprehensions about the future. Anxiety over food and water security is a driving force of a renewed corporate colonialism in Africa and Latin America in which the PRC is a major player, emulated with greater hesitation by India—another important reason for viewing ‘Asia’ as an integral part of processes that are ultimately global.<sup>17</sup>

These are not just Chinese, or Indian, or Asian problems, but systemic problems of the capitalist world system, more severe in some locations than in others, but without distinction between developed and developing societies. Claims to ‘alternative modernities’ are not very convincing in societies striving to become hegemonic within the confines of global capitalism in which they are deeply entangled. If I may quote here Mishra’s pained observation:

Much of the ‘emerging’ world now stands to repeat, on an ominously large scale, the West’s own tortured and often tragic experience of modern ‘development’. In India and China, the pursuit of economic growth at all costs has created a gaudy elite, but it has also widened already alarming social and economic disparities. It has become clear that development, whether undertaken by colonial masters or sovereign nation-states, doesn’t benefit people evenly within a single territory, not to mention across large regions. Certainly, China’s and India’s new middle classes have done very well out of two decades of capitalism, and their ruling elites can strut across the world stage like never before. But this apparently wildly successful culmination to the anti-colonial revolution has coincided with a veritable counter-revolution presided over by political and business elites across the world: the privatization and truncation of public services, de-unionization, the fragmentation and lumpenization of urban working classes, and the ruthless suppression of the rural poor (Mishra 2012, pp. 307-308).

The ‘counter-revolution’, too, is global. As I have already alluded, in its dominant guise, the discourse of ‘Asia

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rising’ is a joint ‘East-West’ product, with contributions from the south. If the discourse is not very forthcoming where its apprehensions are concerned, its silence is deafening when it comes to the relationship between corporate interest, economies founded upon the production of consumption, and Asian problems. As integration in capitalism accounts for ‘Asia’s rise’, it is also a generator of some of Asia’s most unmanageable problems. On the very day last January when Beijing was choking under smog visible from space, General Motors published a report on how many cars it anticipated selling in China this coming year, and how many it would be exporting to other Asian countries from its production in China.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Shanghai is sinking due to a declining water table and under the weight of the real estate it has built to become Asia’s face to the world of finance. A Guangdong provincial academy of science analysis just a few years back reported that Guangzhou might be under water in a few decades (Guangzhou, 2003; ‘Sinking Shanghai’, 2013; Kaye, 2012).<sup>19</sup> The half-hearted efforts of the Chinese government to deal with some of these problems are often greeted in all-powerful stock markets by dismay at slowing down the global economy (Dirlik and Prazniak, 2012).

It seems certain by now that the Chinese economy will surpass in size that of the United States in a few decades to become the foremost economy of the globe, to be followed shortly thereafter by India. Barring regime change which would create more uncertainties, this may also point to a looming hegemonic shift in the order of Euromodernity, enforced presently by the United States. The possibility has long been anticipated by world system analysts Immanuel Wallerstein, Giovanni Arrighi, Andre Gunder Frank and others, who understandably have been reticent over the question of what comes next.<sup>20</sup> It is no secret that the People’s Republic of China has openly if cautiously proclaimed aspirations to world leadership in the promotion of ‘the Chinese Model’, a ‘Beijing Consensus’ against that of Washington, ‘the China dream’ which promises to be the preferred slogan of the new Xi Jinping administration, and efforts to project ‘soft power’, of which the so-called Confucius Institutes are emblematic. For the PRC, the rise of Asia implies not just the reformation of the global order in order to recognise the new Asian presence, but also a reconsideration of the rules of the global

game—in other words, not just a reconfiguration of power relations but a paradigmatic transformation of the way those relations are organised. Some Chinese international relations experts have called for a change in the world order, in which the anti-colonialist aspirations of a revolutionary past are blended with memories of a once hegemonic Chinese order in eastern Asia.<sup>21</sup> As the editorial introduction to an officially sponsored journal put it,

*International Critical Thought* appears toward what is probably the end of a stretch of history. In the past 500 years, capitalism, with its inclusive and pervasive mode of production and consumption and its social principles, has changed the world in its entirety and in details, sending humanity to heights never before dreamed of or imagined.... However, two years ago, the inner contradictions of capitalism found a once-in-a-century vent in the outburst of financial tumult and economic crisis across the world. From the macro-perspective of history, many examples have combined to indicate one single fact: capitalism is exhausting its institutional and cultural energy. Furthermore, two absolute limits are taking form on the horizon: the end of its extensive development due to the generalization of wage-owners, and the environmental barrier constituted by the increased scarcity of natural resources and by the climate change. Thus, human history has entered a period of uncertainty, and ‘another world’ is not just possible but inevitable (Editor’s note, 2011, p. 1).<sup>22</sup>

The authors go on to observe that ‘Western civilisation, that has successfully created and recreated capitalism does not seem to be good enough or rich enough for the construction of “another world”’ (Ibid.) While they advocate dialogue among all concerned in the construction of the world, the two laudatory discussions of the ‘China model’ in the introductory issue as if it had somehow transcended capitalism confirms the impression that China might be next in line to undertake the task.

This may indeed be an opportune moment, for the People’s Republic of China if not for Asia. But despite all the positive or negative hype about China, it is not at all clear that the PRC is desirous of taking over the task of world hegemony beyond its ambitions in Eastern Asia (Lee, 2002).<sup>23</sup> For all its newfound

economic power, China remains an insular society, with little indication that it is in a position to manage the global economy of which it has become an anchor.<sup>24</sup> Available studies suggest, moreover, that the Chinese insistence on tending to economic relationships without burdening them with political concerns is at odds with hegemonic aspirations which ultimately call for closer political involvement in international affairs and institutions.<sup>25</sup> It is not very helpful that out of cultural pride or anxiety, no longer easily distinguishable, the PRC government and opinion makers should insist on adding ‘Chinese characteristics’ to every imaginable aspect of global culture to find its way into China—from the Marxism the regime claims as its ideological foundation to the most trivial cultural imports that already are part of everyday life. The prevalent political and cultural assumption that ‘the foreign’ should be made to serve ‘the Chinese’—an attitude as old as the history of Chinese modernisation—nevertheless contrasts unfavorably with earlier revolutionary professions of solidarity with the oppressed. It also preempts cosmopolitan engagement of the foreign that may be a precondition of effective ideological and moral hegemony.<sup>26</sup> It seems ironic that enhanced economic and political power should serve rather than mitigate a parochial cultural self-obsession.

As the quotation above from Mishra indicates, given available evidence, the domination of the world economy by China or India would hardly add up to a shift in hegemony that would usher in a paradigm change. Mishra once again puts it eloquently:

....this success [Asia’s] conceals an immense intellectual failure, one that has profound ramifications for the world today and the near future. It is simply this: no convincingly universalist response exists today to Western ideas of politics and economy, even though these seem increasingly febrile and dangerously unsuitable in large parts of the world. Gandhi, their most rigorous critic, is a forgotten figure within India today. Marxism-Leninism lies discredited and, though China’s rulers increasingly make gestures towards Confucian notions of harmony, China’s own legacy of ethical politics and socio-economic theory remains largely unexplored. And even if it is exportable to other Muslim countries, Turkey’s Islamic modernity doesn’t point to any alternative socio-economic order.

The ‘Washington Consensus’ may lie in tatters, and Beijing’s Communist regime mocks—simply by persisting as long as it has—Western claims of victory in the Cold War and the inevitability of liberal democracy. But the ‘Beijing Consensus’ has even less universal application than its Washington counterpart; it sounds suspiciously like merely a cynical economic argument for the lack of political freedom (Mishra, 2012, p. 306).<sup>27</sup> While many are awed by China’s development, it is not clear how many of those might be willing to live with a Chinese hegemony—in Asia, or elsewhere. Given the global drift to authoritarianism, suppression of dissent, and the institution of a surveillance society, there is no reason to rule out such an eventuality—even in advanced capitalist societies or developing societies like India with their democratic institutions. Societies of the Global South are less keen than ever to follow the United States example. And everywhere, money talks loud, very loud indeed, at a time of global financial crisis. Economic interest would appear to trump qualms about democracy and human rights in the contemporary rush to China (Dirlik and Prazniak, 2012; Fox News, 2013).<sup>28</sup>

While there is much to be celebrated in their efforts to alleviate poverty, I think it is fair to say that from the perspective of human rights and social justice, neither China nor other up-and-coming Asian societies provide models worthy of emulation beyond the recent leap forward in their economic development—nothing, at any rate, to give them an edge over the hegemony they would challenge. Many of these countries are world leaders in the suppression of press freedoms and the imprisonment of journalists. They also suffer from deep social inequalities, and are plagued with extraordinary gender problems and seemingly incurable rural deformation. Asia leads the world in building mega-cities, but it is also home to the most polluted among them. Indeed, destruction of the environment, readily acknowledged by the leadership, is the aspect of China’s development most likely to extinguish any desire to emulate the ‘China model’. If China continues to rise along the same path, Li Minqi has argued, it will be the end of the capitalist world-system—and, we might add, of the world as we know it, especially if India follows along the same path (Li, 2008).<sup>29</sup> In the meantime, such is the power of ‘the desire named



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development’ that it marches past all evidence of accumulating disaster—from global warming to new threats of infectious epidemics, from the Fukushima disaster two years ago to the more recent infestation of Shanghai’s drinking water with thousands of diseased dead pigs (Nigam, 2011; McCarthy, 2013; Ford, 2013).

None of this is to say that the rise of Asia is inconceivable or undesirable. What if these problems are resolved with technological fixes, as promised by the developmentalist faith that probably has more adherents in Asia presently than elsewhere? So much the better, for Asia and the world. But what if they cannot be, for which there is equally if not more compelling evidence—most importantly the failing example of the so-called developed capitalist societies? If ‘Asia’ is to claim a new paradigm, it needs urgently to rethink the developmental path that has brought it to the present crossroads. The hype over ‘Asia rising’, and the rivalries it generates, may be an obstacle to the solution of problems created by development by sustaining faith in their future solution. It disguises, above all, that ‘Asia’s problems are global problems. And global problems are Asia’s problems’.

In a work published in 1979, that was influential in business and government circles, and was one of the first to herald the rise of economies in Asia, especially eastern Asia, futurologist Herman Kahn wrote that, ‘it is probably a waste of time to think ideologically about stopping progress (much less social change) and foolish to regret that much of the physical environment and many established institutions must change’ (Kahn 1979, p. 24). He may well be right, because this is the hegemonic ideology of the present. The question, however, is not stopping development or ‘progress’ or ‘social change’, but to develop differently, with a view to human needs and survival. This is something well-understood, and frequently acknowledged. And yet efforts to address it are routinely hampered by social and political obstacles to changes that are not in ruling interests (‘China Signals’, 2013). There are ideological obstacles, too. Kishore Mahbubani probably speaks for many in Asia (and elsewhere) when he states that insistence on issues of democracy, human rights, and the like, is putting the cart before the horse, because these are questions that should wait upon the more urgent tasks of development (Mahbubani, 2002, pp. 54, 76). Quite the contrary. These values need to be integral to the very process of development, if development is to

serve human needs, rather than needs of nations, classes, or genders. What is urgently needed is not development that serves particular interests or becomes its own end, but fair and humane development that preserves social integrity and justice, and the environment which is the very condition of our existence.

It may take a more restricted and more socially and ecologically responsible sense of ‘Asia’ and ‘rise’ to realise alternative futures beyond the present order which indeed seems to have run its course. In its more restricted sense, the discourse on the ‘rise of Asia’ points to aspirations to an autonomous space outside of Euro/American hegemony for the creation of Asian modernities that promise solution of the problems that have been thrown up by capitalist development. Such a space need not be coterminous with one or another geographical delineation of Asia. There is no apparent reason why different constituencies should not be able to imagine Asia differently, which would suggest the possibility of a multiplicity of Asian spaces. This is already the case, visible especially in migrant communities where different ideas of Asianness are in formation in response to local circumstances. Moreover, to escape some of the problems discussed above, it is probably necessary to conceive of Asian spaces as spaces apart from national entities, with their ambivalent relationships to a notion of Asia and to one another that is not particularly conducive to the construction of an ‘Asia-consciousness. This is as much a necessity now as it was in the first stirrings of such a consciousness at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 

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NOTES

- 1

Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. ASEAN has been around for sometime now. Over the decade since its formal establishment, the SCO has also made impressive headway in extending organisational activity to Western Asia and linkages with ASEAN. See, Karrar, 2009.
- 2

An outstanding example of scholarly interest in ‘Asia’ as a whole, in its time quite popular, is Pye and Pye (1985). The Pyes defended their use of Asia on commonsensical grounds, as a response to interest in ‘Asia’, but also because: ‘The unity of Europe lies in its history; the unity of Asia in the more subtle, but no less real, shared consciousness of the desirability of change and of making a future different from the past’ (p. 2). This study of ‘Asia’, however, excluded Northern and Southwestern Asia (‘more a part of the Middle East’, p. xi), and was held together less by generalities about ‘the desirability of change’ than the cultural authoritarianism that the authors viewed as a general characteristic of the Asian societies they included.
- 3

An eloquent organisational expression of this shared past is BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) which is not, strictly speaking, an ‘Asian’ organisation, and a reminder of the possibilities of a broader solidarity that goes beyond Asia, reminiscent of the Bandung and Third World legacies. Ironically, we owe this acronym(as well as the term, ‘Beijing Consensus’) to Goldman Sachs. The world has changed.
- 4

For a sampling of recent scholarly discussions of ‘Asia’ in English from a variety of perspectives, see, Chen, 2010; Duara, 2001; Harootunian, 2012, pp. 7-35; Harootunian, 1996); Sakai, 2000, Spivak, 2008; Wang, 2011; and, Pala, forthcoming.
- 5

Mahbubani 2002, 2013. On both occasions, Mahbubani sees in his complex family tree the existence of Asia (Mahbubani, 2002, p. 10. His strong claim about an Asia-Europe divide is hardly justified by his rather meek observation that ‘Asians and Westerners do think differently about some things’ (Ibid.)—hardly reason enough to speak of continental or any other divides!
- 6

The discussion here draws on the work of the geographers, Lewis and Wigen 1997. For a critical examination of the idea of Asia, see, Steadman 1969. The ‘stereotypes’ referred to here have been, and continue to be, products of representations and self-representations. Russian orientologists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, trying to deal with Russia’s incongruity with the east-west juxtaposition, proceeded to call into question the Asia-Europe juxtaposition as well (Tolz, 2011, Chap. 2).
- 7

For a discussion of the ambivalence of Indians about being Asian, and ambivalence toward India of other Asians, see, Palat, 2002.
- 8

There is nevertheless variation by country and over time. Presently the preoccupation globally is with the PRC, as it was with ‘Japan as Number One’ in the 1980s. India has held a special place in the UK and in Germany. But there has been a strong tendency among Europeans of assigning special civilisational priority to China, erasing everything between Europe and China, in particular Islam as an obstacle separating the two. This in many ways corresponds to mainstream opinion in the PRC. At a panel discussion held in Seoul, S. Korea, in 1999, the distinguished writer Han Shaogong observed that ‘China’ does not think much about Asia—which is probably a good thing for Asia. His observation makes even more sense a decade later (‘Searching for East Asian Identity: A Modern Myth or Post-modern Reflection’, Sep 30-Oct 1, 1999, Swiss Grand Hotel, Seoul, organised by the Seonam Foundation). For the US, looking West, everything seems to have been blurred West of China, with Japan and Korea as minor competitors. In a book published almost fifty years ago, the historian Akira Iriye argued that the US historically has been unable to handle China and Japan at the same
- 9

A geopolitical/geostrategic analysis that eschews continental divides to focus on persistent regional geographies is offered in Kaplan, 2012. See also Kang, 2010.
- 10

While Europe may claim greater coherence than Asia with the establishment of the European Union, the idea of Europe is by no means a transparent one. For a historical analysis, see, Heffernan, 1998.
- 11

Memories of that earlier age are recalled in the revival of terms like ‘Silk Road’ both on land and along the seas. For an example, see, Simpfindorfer, 2009. The road appears increasingly not as the silk road to China, but the *Chinese* silk road. Nevertheless, closer attention to Central Asia underlines Eurasian continuity, just as attentiveness to the Indian Ocean is reminder of the connectedness of Asia with Africa. Policy institutes such as the Institute of East European, Russian, and Central Asian Studies at CASS are organised according to geopolitical realities, not imaginary continental boundaries.
- 12

While for obvious reasons the rhetoric of anti-imperialism has largely disappeared from political language in the PRC, there is no reason to think that the sentiment has disappeared with it. Indeed, post-revolutionary China remains loyal to the goals of the revolution when it comes to territorial sovereignty. *A Xinhua bao* editorial published in 1949 on the eve of the founding of the PRC stated that: ‘The Chinese People’s Liberation Army must liberate the whole territory of China, including Tibet, Sinkiang [Xinjiang], and so forth. Even an inch of Chinese land will not be permitted to be left outside the jurisdiction of the People’s Republic of China. We tolerate no longer the aggression of foreign countries. This is the unchangeable policy of the Chinese Communist Party and the People’s Liberation Army’. Summary of World Broadcasts, no. 17 (2 September 1949), p. 27, cited in Shakya, 1999), p. 9. Now, we might add, the seas have been added to the land.
- 13

Thus, one analyst writes that, ‘as ASEAN progressively moves towards a closer, unified community in 2015 there is a parallel but contrasting trend of escalating military spending among member states through acquisition of weapons that are offensive in nature such as fighter jets and submarines amidst the increasing tension in the region. This may suggest the emergence of an arms race of sorts among ASEAN member-states’. Syailendra, 2013.
- 14

If it is possible to speak of a ‘Chinese model’, this is one aspect that is usually avoided. The plunder of land and the release of a new labor force has been fundamental to the development of capitalism from its English origins. Chinese success nevertheless no doubt inspires others. See, Asian Correspondent, 2013. Indian entrepreneurs fret that the legal system denies them the ease of plunder enjoyed by their Chinese competitors. For issues of land and popular resistance in India, see, Roy, 2011. This ‘internal colonialism’ is accompanied by a new colonialism driven by food and security concerns, most prominently in Africa (Hazra, 2009; Menon, 2013). This makes it all the more ironic that ‘the rise of Asia’ should separate Asia from Africa.
- 15

Chang Kyung-Sup has coined the term ‘developmental citizenship’ to describe citizenship ‘in nations ruled by developmentalist—democratic or not—regimes’ where ‘the practically observable rights and duties of citizens in regards to their state have predominantly revolved around national economic development and individualised material livelihood’. Under such conditions, development takes
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priority over economic, political, social and cultural rights, and the alliance of the state with capital is a generally recognised condition of development (Chang, 2012, p. 203). We might add that this appears to be a trend also in ‘developed’ societies with the concentration of wealth and sharpening of inequality.

16 China’s development has created severe problems not just within the country, but ecological destruction in surrounding states, Australia, South America, and prospectively, North America. Much of this is due to the voracious appetite for resources, from oil, natural gas and coal to food supplies and water. If China behaves piratically on occasion to secure resources, it is merely following in the footsteps of advanced capitalist societies. But the consequences, including the potential conflict, can hardly be ignored. These matters are daily in the headlines (Zhang, 2012; Chellaney, 2013). The potential for war in conflicts over water in the Himalayas has frightened an observer to speculate on the beginnings of World War III in Kashmir (Kazmi, 2013).

17 News of these activities is everywhere as China ‘rises’. For a recent example involving mining in Ecuador, see, Zaitchik, 2013. China, of course, has also been active ‘land-grabbing’ everywhere, especially Africa, but it is by no means the only country engaged in such activity, which includes Euro/American corporations, Arabian states as well as India (Menon, 2013). In all of these cases, land-grabbing abroad is an extension of land-grabbing at home to finance development. This is one important aspect of what David Harvey has described as ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey, 2003). For a study, see, Liberti, 2013. English version, forthcoming.

18 For the relationship between automobiles and the smog in Beijing this past winter, see, Lelyveld, 2013. Less dramatic than smog visible from outer space but no less important in consequence is water pollution. For a recent report, see, Reuters, 2013. Both air and water pollution are serious problems of most Asian cities. According to a recent report, in 2010 close to two million people died in Asia of causes related to air pollution. See, ‘Beijing’, 2013.

19 ‘For a discussion of the plight of Asian ‘megacities’, see, Jamil and Ali, 2013.

20 Frank, 1998, and, Arrighi, 2008 have been especially influential. If indeed there are signs of a hegemonic shift presently, it faces political, military and ecological conditions quite different from the last such shift in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century from a British to a US hegemony, leaving the future open. rather than necessarily shifting to a new center, as would be anticipated in more economic and cyclically oriented versions of world system analysis (Wallerstein, 1996).

21 Wang, 2011, pp. 81-84. For an IR perspective, see, Li, 2005, p. 366. Much as the US scholar John King Fairbank, Li sees the encounter with ‘the West’ as an encounter of two world-views, different in its consequences from colonial relations elsewhere. Li disagrees with the influence on foreign policy thinking of a ‘victim mentality’ (*beihai zhe qingxu* 受害者情绪) that would turn China’s rise—similarly to Mishra—into ‘revenge’ against the ‘West’ (p. 347). The idea of ‘all-under-heaven’ (*tianxia* 天下), along with the familial conception of rule, in his view had historically obstructed the emergence of

national and national consciousness. The absence of an ‘other’ in the tianxia outlook also obviated the need for a sense of the self. For a defense of *tianxia* as the conception of a sense of totality that has logical priority to the parts (nation-states), see, Zhao, 2006. Stress on ‘all-under-heaven’ as a possible framework for global relations also draws attention to ‘ritual’ (*li* 礼), as an alternative to laws, that ideally governed relations with the outside world as it did internally. The problem for Chinese advocates of ‘all-under-heaven’ is that the ‘tribute system’ that was its expression is not very persuasive to nations that claim their sovereignty, and is full of contradiction for the jealous insistence of the PRC on its own sovereignty. In the end, it leaves only the PRC as the sovereign state in the neighbourhood.

22 I am a member of the editorial board of this journal, which is a publication of the Marxism Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. See, also, Xi, 2013.

23 The PRC’s ambitions have expanded with increased economic power, and there are no doubt those who advocate greater assertiveness in world politics. For different perspectives from neighboring states responding to most recent US within the context of China’s ambitions, see, ‘Roundtable’, 2013. For a Russian perspective that shifts the burden to the US because ‘China’s geostrategic plans do not even contain hints at planning an armed expansion anywhere’, see, Voice of Russia, 2013.

24 For a rather bleak assessment of China’s present and future, see, Barnett, 2013. A more optimistic assessment that focuses on economic issues alone will be found in Rapoza, 2013a. The same author’s uncertainties are apparent in a piece written about the same time (Rapoza, 2013b).

25 Wang and French, 2013. According to the authors, compared to other BRIC states (Brazil, Russia and India), China still has a low level of participation in global institutions in terms of personnel and financial contribution. See, also, Wang, 2013.

26 Barne,1999, especially chap. 10, with its colorful title: ‘to screw foreigners is patriotic’.

27 The term ‘Beijing Consensus’, we might add, was coined by a former employee of Goldman Sachs, more recently a member of Kissinger Associates, Inc. (Ramo, 2004). For further discussion, see, Dirlik, 2007, especially chap. 6. Many Chinese intellectuals and party officials were unwilling initially to embrace the term. For a collection of discussion, see, Yu Keping, Huang Ping, Xie Shuguang and Gao Jian (eds.), 2006.

28 There was some talk recently, if only in half-jest, that National Aeronautics and Space Administration in the US, running out of funds, might approach the PRC government for funding (‘To Save NASA’, 2013). Constitutional commitment to the defense of ‘nature’s rights’ has not stopped the government of Ecuador from entering destructive mining deals with Canadian and Chinese companies (Zaitchik, 2013).

29 See, also, Chomsky, 2013. For a thoughtful interview on the global impact of China’s environmental consumption and pollution with Craig Simons, author of *The Devouring Dragon: How China’s Rise Threatens Our Natural World*, see, Wong, 2013.

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