

One Asia in History: Recasting and Forecasting

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“Among us the Acarya, the Venerable Bhadanta Jnanaprabha, possessed of numerous and limitless knowledge, join me in enquiring about you. The Upasakas, here, always offer their salutation to you. We all are sending you a pair of white cloths to show that we are not forgetful. The road is long. So do not mind the smallness of the present. We wish you may accept it.”

Letter written to Chinese monk Xuanzang by Indian monks
Prajnadeva and Jnanaprabha, May, 652 CE.¹

Ever since Japanese art historian Okakura Tenshin wrote “Asia is one” the term has been debated. Can a vast continent like Asia be one, meaning tied together in its lifestyles and cultures—one civilization? The question obviously cannot be taken literally. Besides, there has to be awareness about living in the same continent for its people to feel they are one. But, I argue that over millennia many population of the Asian continent developed a sense of familiarity thanks to sharing common beliefs and lifestyles

¹CE denotes the Common Era calendric system. The letter is found in Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, *India and China: A thousand Years of Cultural Relations* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1971), 81.

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born of similar geographic, climatic, and economic conditions. The name Asia given to the region from the Indian Ocean to the East China Sea came later, but the sense of belonging to the region and seeing it as an open area and their natural habitat, emerged from the first centuries of the Common Era. I further submit that the notion of an Asian continent and common Asian culture initially introduced by Europeans fell on fertile soil prepared over the millennia through cultural and commercial contacts. Later the description of the continent was further divided into sub-regions as East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia depending often on the political and economic boundaries that emerged. In this chapter the term Asia has been used to denote the entire continent from the Arabian Sea to the Pacific Ocean tied by a history of trade, migration, and culture.

When Okakura Tenshin (1862–1913) proclaimed “Asia is one” in his seminal 1903 book, *The Ideals of the East*, he was summing up the historical knowledge created in the preceding two centuries of European connection and colonial rule.² He found a spiritual unity among Asian people, saying that “not even the snowy barriers [between the Chinese and Indian civilizations] can interrupt for one moment the broad expanse of love for the Ultimate and Universal, which is the common thought of every Asiatic race and distinguishes these people from those maritime peoples of the Mediterranean and Baltic, who love to dwell on the Particular, and search out means, not the end, of life.”³ Indian philosophers, poets, and religious figures found universal values in what was seen as the Asian view. Even those who did not care much about the spiritual commonality found the European culture and social norms quite different, thus, strengthening the idea of an Asian identity. In recent times some historians, like the editors of *Asia Inside Out: Changing Times*, have come to view Asia not as a region

²Another modern Japanese writer dismisses the idea of Asian civilization as “The Asian world and Asian civilization cited so often of late have their origins not deep in the past but in modernization this century in an Asia in contact with the West.” Without one language, one administration, one religion, like Western civilization under Roman Empire, he affirmed, “To repeat: there has never been an Asian, let alone East Asian, sphere of civilization.” Masakazu Yamazaki, ‘Asia, a Civilization in the Making: East Asia, the Pacific, and the Modern Age,’ *Foreign Affairs*, 75:4, (1996), 107.

³Quoted by Anthony Milner, ‘Asia’ Consciousness and Asian Values’, Working Technical paper, Australian National University, 2001, accessed on December 15 2015 at: <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/41906>.

with clearly defined regional and national boundaries, but as “spaces of flows,” arenas in which multiple processes, peoples, commodities, and cultural formations interacted dynamically over long periods. Growing trade, especially the rise of trading in synchrony with the monsoon winds, transformed the Indian Ocean into a virtual lake lined with ports and entrepôt harbors where trading diasporas from all over Asia lived and traded goods, creating a prosperous commercial network tightly connecting the whole region. As opposition to European colonial rule and oppression grew in the nineteenth century, Asian identity or national historical heritage emerged as an important means for national struggle. Even during the intense national struggles, awareness of a common Asian destiny led to occasional pan-Asian cooperation. Nonetheless, the thoughts of Universalist Asianists like Rabindranath Tagore were overshadowed by specific nationalist struggles for different political independences.

In the 1900s the emergent military power, Japan, turned the cultural pride of Asia into a powerful propaganda weapon in its imperial drive to create an Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. In the post Cold War years the United States attempted to create an Asian anti-communist bloc, which ultimately gave way to feuding nation states.

Asia’s phenomenal economic growth in the late twentieth century revived and fuelled pride about Asian cultural heritage—summed up in the term “Asian values”—as a key factor in its success. Renewed interest about Asian civilization that looked at the diverse region spawned a plethora of writing about its common cultural heritage and the role it might have played in the rise of Asia. The 1997 economic crisis, however, somewhat dented that pride about Southeast Asia. The rise of China in the past two decades lent credence to the sense that Asia is unique. Consequently the call “Asia for Asians” has resurfaced.

In recent years a rising China, buoyed by economic and military might, has sought to take over the leadership of Asia. It has not overtly invoked pan-Asian solidarity, but it clearly hopes to diminish and eventually elbow out US influence from the region. China’s ambitious proposal of “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) aims to tie together all of the Asian landmass and the oceans with a vast road, railway, pipeline, and marine network that links to Europe and the Middle East. Backed by Asia-wide financial and investment institutions under its leadership, China appears to be endeavoring to create a gigantic economic-political framework with the Asian continent at its core.

This chapter examines the role of geography, climate, trade, and cultural exchanges in the creation of a sense of One Asia and the role played by the

region's dominant powers over the centuries to create an Asian cultural, political, and economic identity. Asia can best be described not as a single canvas covering a geographic area, but as a palimpsest of various cultures painted over the millennia, creating many hues and images linked through layers of history.

Ever since the Greeks looked east across the Aegean Sea to where the sun rose and called the coastal region Asuya, the nomenclature stuck to the vast landmass that lay beyond. Orient and Cathay have been other appellations, but the term Asia is the most commonly used. Later, as trading with Asia grew, the ocean surrounding Asia as the thoroughfare of trade delineated the borders of the continent. The Tenth century Arab geographer al-Muqaddasi considered the peninsula of the Arabs encompassed by what they called the "sea of China." As historian K.N. Chaudhury notes, Muslim geographers "could see, as we can, that the sea which washed the desolate beaches of Suez or the marshes around Basra provided an unbroken means of travel all the way to China, beyond which lay an unnavigable ocean, the Pacific."⁴

Knowledge about the Asian continent as we know it—and not Anatolia in today's Turkey that the Greeks imagined to be Asia—took shape in the thousands of years of growing connections among peoples. First, it was trade, migration, and cultural interaction among populations that created familiarity and strengthened bonds. Then archaeological discoveries and modern historical research came along, presenting long-lost artistic and religious heritage and setting it in historical context. Growing knowledge about the region's history and its extensive connections confirmed what people had understood first hand through trade, travel, and religious practices.

THE MONSOON IDENTITY

The vast Asian landmass containing the world's highest mountains and the longest rivers, the high Tibetan plateau—the roof of the world—and wide expanses of deserts and steppes is peopled by diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups. Since the nineteenth century European discoverers and

⁴K.N. Chaudhury, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 3.

colonial rulers called them Asiatic and Oriental simply because they were non-European. However, thanks to geographic features and climatic variations, commonality was created in a substantial part of South and East Asia. In this populated part of Asia, life was shaped by the monsoon wind and rain-fed agriculture. From the Indian Subcontinent in the west to Japan in the east and from 50 degrees north latitude in Northern China to 10 degrees south latitude in Indonesia the entire region—currently the home of 3.2 billion people—has rice agriculture fed by monsoon rains.⁵ The prevalence of monsoon over Asia gave the region its climatic identity—Monsoon Asia.

The vast Asian waters were made navigable by the trade winds that Arab sailors called “*mausin*” or the monsoon. This seasonal wind blew for half the year in one direction and then reversed direction. This reversible nature of the wind brought traders from the Red Sea to India and beyond in June–August and allowed them to return home with their merchandise fairly rapidly, without waiting till the autumn. Indian traders looking for profit turned east, sailing the uncharted waters of islands in Southeast Asia in search of gold and fragrant wood. They also carried traders, pilgrims, monks, and fortune seekers who connected all of Asia. Southeast Asian islands also earned their first name from the monsoon, the “Lands below the Winds.” The monsoon-driven trade routes divided Asia into two main sectors: lands “above the wind,” which meant ports in the Indian Ocean, and lands “below the wind,” or *Zirbâdât* in Arabic, which denoted the Straits of Melaka, South China Sea, Java Sea, and waters further east. The wind-driven trade of spices and gold proved central to the economic development of Southeast Asia. Melaka, or Malacca, became one of the most vibrant cosmopolitan cities in Southeast Asia and the favorite entrepôt for swapping goods.⁶

Monsoon and geography helped shape other identities too—especially food. Rice, *Orizya sativa*, originated in India and Southeast Asia and spread all over Asia replacing roots and tuber as staples. Rice not only became the staple food for most of the population, but rice growing occupied the vast majority of farmers. Anthropologists argue that

⁵Randolph Barker, Robert W. Herdt, Beth Rose 1985, *The Rice Economy of Asia* Volume 2, (Manila: Int. Rice Res. Inst, 1985).

⁶Nayan Chanda, *Bound Together: How Traders, Preachers, Adventurers and Warriors Shaped Globalization* (Connecticut: Yale 2007), 47.

cultivating labor-intensive rice favored by monsoon rains and irrigation, grown over most of Asia, has taught Asians to value the collective over the individual. In a recent survey-based study published in the journal *Science* the authors explain the “Rice Theory” that people from Asian rice-growing areas are interdependent and more concerned about collective rather than individual interest. The main reason lies in the nature of rice farming. The authors argue that as a finicky crop, rice paddies need standing water requiring complex irrigation systems and a community of rice farmers who work together in tightly integrated ways. The attitude, they found, is transmitted to non-farmers who live in the rice-growing areas, “simply put, you do not need to farm rice yourself to inherit rice culture,” they affirm. It is true not just in China, but in other countries as well. “Japan and Korea’s rice legacies could explain why they are still much less individualistic than similarly wealthy countries.”⁷

Along with the staples of rice and fish, the habit of drinking tea has also become widespread—first in China and then in the rest of Asia. Tea, first discovered in China, became a popular drink thanks to the spread of Buddhism and monks drinking it to stay wakeful. Tea incidentally was one of the safest drinks because the water was boiled, which kept tea drinking Asians healthy—something that early European travelers noted with amazement. Other foods and condiments spread throughout the region—from pepper and spices to chili pepper, corn, and peanuts (the last three introduced by European traders)—also gave Asians common culinary markers of identity. Cotton, which was first domesticated in India and led to the rise of a thriving cotton weaving industry, was introduced to China and other parts of Asia, giving the region washable fabric to wear. While silk produced in China clothed the royalty and the elite, large scale use of cotton clothing gave the region a special identity. As one historian notes, “by 1500, the importation of Indian cloth across Southeast Asia was about a square meter per person. If most of this went to the rich, still Indian cloth was traded not only in the great maritime emporia: it reached the tiny

⁷T. Talhelm, X. Zhang, S. Oishi, C. Shimin, D. Duan, X. Lan, S. Kitayama, ‘Large-Scale Psychological Differences Within China Explained by Rice Versus Wheat Agriculture’, *Science*, vol 344, May 9, (2014).

spice-growing islands in eastern Indonesia ... and the land-locked kingdom of Laos.”⁸

THE TRADE CONNECTION

Trade within the region and with the Mediterranean world has been an important unifying factor. The desire to live better and earn profits has driven Asian traders to risk their lives crossing through jungles, mountains, deserts, and oceans. In the process they created common economic spaces from the very beginning of recorded history. Long-distance trading created a cosmopolitanism that promoted Asia’s trademarks of tolerance, trust, and desire for coexistence and laid the foundations for prosperity. While camels and horses enabled long distance travel and trade across its vast steppes and deserts, as a continent surrounded by oceans, Asia lived by water and, as we have seen, boats propelled by monsoon winds connected thousands of miles of coastline from the Indian Ocean to the East China Sea.

Ever since second century BCE when a Han dynasty envoy traveled across Central Asia to blaze the trail that would later be called the Silk Road, trade has blossomed. For more than a millennium, this constantly shifting network of pathways served as the great connector between the Asian mainland, Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa. For rulers, whether in China or India or other countries without pastures for horse-breeding, Central Asian and later Arabian horses became a prized trading item. They were not only the equivalent of today’s luxury Porsche, but were essential to building a powerful cavalry. China’s Tang dynasty records show the government spent nearly a seventh of its annual revenue received from bolts of silk to import one hundred thousand horses. And, of course, the Silk Road conveyed much more than goods.⁹

For more than a millennium the path that spanned three continents became a conveyor belt for the transmission of religions, art, philosophy, languages, technologies, germs, and genes. The peaceful environment maintained by Mongol watchtowers and garrisons and the maintenance of

⁸Gene M. Chenoweth, “Melaka, “Piracy” and the Modern World System,” *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. 13, No. 1. (1996–1999), 107–125.

⁹Xinru Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges, AD 1-600* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1988), 53–64.

caravanserais, or rest houses, along the route boosted the flow of merchandise and the exchange of ideas.

By the first century, Chinese silk was transported along the Silk Road to Indian ports in modern day Gujarat to be sold to Greek and Roman traders who had ridden the monsoon winds all the way through the Red Sea. Coral, wine, glass, frankincense, and other products that Roman traders brought had to be supplemented by gold coins to pay for their enormous demand for silk and spices. The extent of the trade is visible with the discovery of Roman gold coins from India to Vietnam.

Although China lost its silk-making monopoly by the fourth or fifth century, it maintained a profitable trade with India by producing special export-quality silk with motifs specially designed for the Indian market. Reciprocally, Indian semi-precious stones and medicinal herbs enjoyed great popularity in China. Even as far back as the fourth century, travelers encountered goods from different countries during their journeys through Asia. Along the terrestrial and marine Silk Road, goods from China and India traveled creating a common Asian market. While the trade across Central Asia carried by camels was necessarily light weight and high value—silk and precious stones—destined for the elite, seaborne trade expanded the circle of consumers. Apart from silks, satins, perfumes, jewelry, iron, sulfur, porcelains, cooking utensils, cotton coming from China and pearls from India, and spices, pepper, and specialized woods from Southeast Asia were on sale in Asian marts. Chinese Buddhist monk Faxian recounted how moved he was to witness a merchant in Sri Lanka offer a white silk fan of Chinese origin to the Buddha. Seeing a familiar Chinese product being used to worship the Buddha thousands of miles away, a homesick Faxian found his eyes filled with tears.

ALL THE LANDS WITHIN THE SEAS ARE UNITED IN ONE BODY

As shipping technology and maritime knowledge grew, Asian trade networks expanded from the western coast of India to southern Japan. As one scholar observed, “This huge but politically fragmented and often sparsely populated region around “a sea common to all” spawned a fluid, multi-ethnic, and dynamic transnational economic zone and flexible political boundaries in which waterborne commerce and the string of ports that

facilitated it were essential.”¹⁰ The sultan of Melaka, Mansur, wrote to the king of the Ryukyu Islands in 1468 extolling the benefits of maritime trade relations in the region connected by water: “We have learned that to master the blue oceans people must engage in commerce and trade. All the lands within the seas are united in one body. Life has never been so affluent in preceding generations as it is today.”¹¹ The rise of trade networks not only brought prosperity to people in the port cities, but connection with the hinterland transmitted goods and brought the interior out to the world. Traders, especially the Chinese, not only transported goods from Southeast Asian to Chinese ports, they engaged in coastal trade integrating all of Southeast Asia in a mesh of commercial networks. Tax collected from traders, often amounting to a third of the royal revenue—as in Ayutthaya—linked the prosperity of Asian rulers across the region. The rulers even issued coins modeled on Chinese coins that came into circulation, thus facilitating foreign trade. The need for sailors to wait for the return monsoon had created a large multiethnic trading diaspora who inhabited the large port cities of Melaka, Ayutthaya, Hoi An, and Guangzhou. Although they usually lived in separate quarters, the traders often married local women and settled down. Chinese trading communities and sailors could be found from India to Japan. The hybrid communities that foreign merchants left behind have become a trademark of the Asian trading scene. Traders helped develop a common language spoken at the ports—pidgin Arabic, Malay, Hindustani, Persian, and Hokkien Chinese. The largest numbers of immigrants were from the coastal region of China. However, the ease of migration and assimilation that marked the port cities creating one Asia gave way to stricter rules under European colonial rule. Still, the fact that some 25 million ethnic Chinese live in Southeast Asia—mainly turning the wheels of regional commerce—is a reminder of the time when Asia was one. Common religious beliefs—whether Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim—practiced by traders and sailors of different faiths in port cities from Melaka, Ayutthaya, and Hoi An to Quanzhou gave traders a structure of trust, yet there was never any state-sponsored proselytism to promote a particular set of religious beliefs until the arrival of aggressive European

¹⁰Craig A. Lockard, ““The Sea Common to All”: Maritime Frontiers, Port Cities, and Chinese Traders in the Southeast Asian Age of Commerce, ca. 1400–1750,” *Journal of World History*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (June 2010), 219–247.

¹¹Ibid.

powers. A corollary of this liberal attitude to organized religion was a largely secular approach to life and a tolerance of other religions, which created the necessary conditions for peace and prosperity. Conspicuously absent in Asia were the crusades and decades-long religious wars that marked European history. In the light of later animosity, it is interesting to note that in the seventeenth century Chinese and Japanese traders lived peacefully in separate quarters in Hoi An each with their own governors.

Pan Asian trade helped to connect people from different parts of the region. The Chinese capital Xian (Chang'an) and the port of Malacca were typical trading centers where Asian and non-Asians of different faiths congregated and inevitably brought about a cultural fusion. Whether or not eighty-four languages were spoken in sixteenth century Malacca, as Tomé Pires claimed, there is no doubting Malacca's welcoming attitude and its multicultural population. Gujaratis, Tamils, Chinese, Javanese, and Malays all at one time or another served as advisors to Malacca's sultans.¹² The Chinese monk Yijing's account makes it clear that sea travel was fairly frequent from Palembang in Sumatra to Guangzhou, China, which took about a month. It promoted migration of traders and laborers across the region bringing diverse ethnic groups in contact.

The Chinese port of Quanzhou (known then as Zaitun or Saiton) was another city of international commerce. "It is the port," Marco Polo wrote, "where all ships from India comeladen with much costly and a multitude of extremely valuable precious stones and big rare pearls... In this port there is a constant movement of such vast amounts of goods and precious stones that it is a marvelous thing to see." As we will see in the twentieth and twenty-first century further spread of such bustling port cities in other parts of South East Asia helped to create what was called Asia's tiger economies.

THE CULTURAL CONNECTION

From the early years of the Common Era the monsoon winds not only carried traders and their merchandise but it also transported Hindu and later Buddhist faiths, rituals, art, architecture, icons, and languages, thus painting on layers of a common culture. A scholar has described the way trade laid

¹²Shawnakim Lowey-Ball, "Liquid Market, Solid State: The rise and demise of the great global emporium at Malacca, 1400-1641", unpublished thesis, Yale University, 2015.

down the common aesthetics of political culture, as “a kind of poetry of politics.” The origin of modern nation states in Asia is rooted in the ambition of chieftains to expand their rule but also their desire to seek legitimacy of their rule through religious ceremony and sanction.¹³ The rise of the Hindu belief system in India with its notions of a divinely sanctioned/ordained ruler was carried by traders to different parts of Southeast Asia and encouraged emerging rulers to seek legitimacy through rituals and blessings by Indian priests. Historians have long debated whether Indian influence in Southeast Asia was the consequence of conquering armies or through peaceful contacts by traders or priests. Hindu ideas, icons, artifacts, and priests invited to perform rites legitimated the new dynasty.

If Hindu notions of kingship and statecraft influenced the character of Southeast Asia’s emerging polities, another Indian belief system—Buddhism—provided long-lasting connections that touched not only rulers but also common people. For hundreds of years devotees and monks from all over Asia trekked to the birthplace of the Buddha and sent votive tablets to different countries. Many monarchs, even though some rulers were not practicing Buddhists themselves, sent repeated missions to India’s Buddhist sites. Missionaries not only carried Buddhist texts to different parts of Asia but translated them from an Indian language, be it Pali, Prakrit, or Sanskrit, to the various languages used in their own countries. The most famous among such missionaries is Xuanzang who returned to the Chinese capital Xi’an in 645 CE carrying more than 600 texts, personally translating many. Asian scholar Victor H. Mair writes that “aside from a handful of sinographically inspired scripts, nearly all of the written vernaculars east of the Pamirs to the Pacific Ocean were a direct result of the Buddhist missionary enterprise.”¹⁴

The letter cited above by Indian monks to Xuanzang seven years after his return to China is a testimony to the close relations created by their common devotion to Buddhism. At emperor Taizong’s request, Xuanzang wrote a detailed record of his journey, describing the places, people, economic, educational and social conditions, religious practices, manners,

¹³Robert Heine-Geldern, “Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 2, (1942), 15–30.

¹⁴Victor H. Mair, “Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 53 (August 1994): 707–751.

and customs of the lands he visited. His account, *Records of the Western Regions*, is perhaps the earliest example of the rise of one Asia.

Ironically Buddhism, a religion of peace, was introduced to Japan by a Korean envoy visiting the Japanese court in 552 CE to seek military support against a foreign invader. It has since profoundly influenced Japanese society, art, and culture. Missionaries also arrived on the island of Sumatra across the Indian Ocean, and Buddhism spread widely in the Indonesian kingdom of Srivijaya. The Sailendra monarchs in Java in all probability commissioned the building of the Borobodur complex.

ARTISTIC IDIOMS OF ASIA

A succession of Burmese and Sri Lankan kings sent gifts to Bodhgaya—where Buddha attained enlightenment—to endow the temple or repair it and earn merit for the sovereign. China's Tang emperors even invited monks with medicinal knowledge to provide longevity drugs. The search for Buddhist relics—his bones and teeth—also engaged Chinese envoys who believed those relics would not only ensure longevity for their emperor but even lead to his being born as a Buddha in his next life. Along with Buddha images, those of Hindu deities spread all over Asia and adapted to local mores and practice became the object of worship—often removed from the original cause for veneration.

Art historian Rajeshwari Ghosh nicely sums up the rise of the original pan-Asian art through a complex dynamic initially inspired by Buddhist art from India.

“Apart from artistic impulses generating from the Indian sub-continent, there was mutual influencing within the various so-called ‘borrowing cultures’. Thus one can see Indic inspired Khmer art influencing Indic inspired art from Thailand, or the art of the Kucha kingdom, on the ‘Northern Silk Road’ (which in itself was the product of molding influences from India as well as Sassanian Persia) stimulating the art of Dunhuang and mainland China. There was also a reverse flow of ideas and the art of mainland China influenced the artistic idioms of the states of Central Asia and one can see marked Tang influence on the art of Turfan or even Kumtura, while Tibetan transformations also crisscrossed these roads, as seen in the bright colors used in the Bezeklik Caves of Turfan. That Chinese Buddhism in turn spread to Korea and Japan and influenced their iconography and aesthetics is self-evident. Thus contacts and influences were multilateral and not restricted

in any bilateral sense to India and a particular region of the Buddhist world.”¹⁵

Along with Buddhist art many aspects of popular culture in Asia were transformed by the spread of Buddhism. Tea-drinking favored by monks to enhance wakefulness also spread from China to Korea, Japan, and the rest of Southeast Asia. Grown in many parts of Asia, tea remains the most popular drink throughout the region. The concept of the reincarnation of the soul and the associated role of karma was shared with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, which also spread all over Asia, if not as a belief then at least as a commonly understood concept.

In the first century CE, the Han emperor Mingdi became the first imperial Chinese convert to Buddhism. He invited two Indian monks, Dharmaraksa and Kasyapa Matanga, to undertake the dangerous journey across the Central Asian desert to Luoyang. Carrying Buddhist manuscripts, paintings, and ritual objects from India, they established the White Horse Temple, which became a center for the diffusion of Buddhist learning for many centuries. A stream of preachers and translators from Central Asia and India moved to China as Chinese monks continued their journey west. The Indian monk Bodhiruci arrived in Luoyang in 508 CE and by the order of the emperor translated many texts, including the Lotus Sutra and the Diamond Sutra. The extent of the spread of Buddhism in China can be gauged from a monk’s report in the sixth century that in Northern China alone there were forty-seven great state monasteries, 839 monasteries built by the royalty, and more than 30,000 Buddhist temples built by commoners. In the south there were 2846 monasteries.¹⁶ It was in this period that hundreds of monks began making pilgrimages to sacred Buddhist sites in South Asia. Interestingly, South Asian monks traveled to China to Mount Wutai as it was considered to be the abode of one of the bodhisattvas.

Buddhist rulers—from China, Myanmar, and the Indonesian archipelago—sent emissaries to pay homage at India’s holy sites to gain legitimacy. Monks from Korea traveled to South Asia in the sixth century to study and

¹⁵Rajeshwari Ghosh, ‘In Quest of a Buddhist Identity’, submitted to *International Journal of Buddhist Studies*, I am grateful for the manuscript shared by the author.

¹⁶Tansen Sen, ed, *Buddhism Across Asia*, vol. 1, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), XIV.

procure Buddhist texts. Monks were not just spiritual teachers but also healers of the body. Indian scholars who traveled to China in the seventh and eighth centuries, similarly, included not only religious scholars, but also other savants in mathematics and astronomy. In the eighth century, an Indian astronomer named Gautama Siddhartha was even made the president of the Board of Astronomy in China. The Buddhist learning center, Nalanda, was the first university in Asia that was attended by Buddhist monks and scholars from China and Southeast Asia. Many Japanese monks traveled to China to study Buddhist texts. By the eleventh century three distinct spheres of Buddhism had emerged in Asia: India-Tibet world; East Asian world of China, Japan, and Korea; and the Sri Lanka—Southeast Asian world. A lingering symbol of the common religious space that Asia enjoyed in the first millennium is the continuing worship of Avalokiteshwar, the Chinese Goddess of Mercy (Guanyin in Chinese and Kwannon in Japanese), by millions of Asians across the region. According to a Buddhist text, “if one happens to fall into the dreadful ocean, the abode of nagas, maritime monsters, and demons, he has but to think of Avalokitesvara, and he shall never sink down in the king of waters.”¹⁷ Guanyin became the protector of sailors who took to the sea in increasing numbers, with her image adorning shrines throughout maritime Asia.

Through trade connections and travel by monks and scholars, Confucian ideas such as respect for elders, family values, and the importance of education took hold in East Asia and helped to provide a framework of a common cultural basis for the region. Confucianism spread all over China and neighboring countries, such as Vietnam, Korea, and more strongly in Japan. Harvard scholar Tu Weiming writes that “despite diversity in size, population base, ethnic composition, colonial experience, degree of Westernization, political system, social structure, and stage of economic development in industrial East Asia, these states share a common cultural heritage which notably includes Confucian ethics.” Although he does not directly link this commonality to the region’s economic success,

¹⁷According to a Buddhist text *Sadharmapundarika sutra* quoted by Osmund Boppearachchi, “Sri Lanka and maritime trade: Bodhisattva Avalokite? vara as the protector of mariners,” in Upinder Singh and Parul Pandya Dhar (eds) *Asian Encounters: Exploring Connected Histories* (New York: Oxford, 2014), 166.

he nevertheless notes that, “Confucian ethics [are] embedded in the social practice and political culture of Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons—Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore.” As Anthony Milner notes: “Chinese spokespeople, not surprisingly, have made so-called ‘Confucian’ values central to an ‘Asian’ cultural unity, arguing that in East Asia the ‘Confucian’ commitment to ‘hard work, thrift, filial, piety, and national pride’ has encouraged rapid economic growth.” Centuries later modern Asian intellectuals would hold Confucian ethics as the basis of what they would call “Asian Values.”

THE IMPERIAL CONNECTIONS

The above account of the spread of religion, icons, and philosophies has been made possible mainly because of the beam of light that Western travelers and colonial rulers cast on the region. In the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries European missionaries travelled to Asia looking to convert, but they came upon a “new” religion that they labeled *bauddhamatham* or Buddha’s point of view. Over the next decades scholars assembled Buddhist manuscripts and scrolls spread all over Asia in monasteries and caves while archaeologists and European colonial administrators brought to light remains of Asia’s glorious past. From the Buddhist caves of Ajanta and Dunhuang to the shrines of Borobudur and temples of Angkor Wat, the cultural history of Asia began to be written. Sir William Jones, whose research established the life of the Buddha, founded the Asiatic Society with the aim of investigating “whatever is performed by man or produced by nature across ‘the geographical limits of Asia’.”¹⁸ Colonial institutions like the Royal Asiatic Society or *Ecole française d’Extrême Orient*, among others, contributed to the recognition of an Asian civilization. Through research and exploration in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the cultural architecture of Asia was uncovered.

The political and military superstructures built by the rulers of dominant Asian empires—Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Southeast Asian—created another layer of the Asian connection. As we have seen, Hindu and

¹⁸*The Bicentenary of the Birth of Sir William Jones, Founder of the Royal Society of Bengal, Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* Vol. 4, No. 1 (Apr., 1946), 58–62, accessed December 12, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/531239?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

Buddhist kings of Southeast Asia promoted contacts with India seeking recognition and spiritual support. By sending missions to holy sites of Buddhism and making offerings, they wanted to earn merit and in the process reinforce relations. The Silk Roads developed by enterprising and intrepid traders had to be protected and sustained by imperial power. The Tang army garrisons along the Silk Road in Central Asia and the Mongol Army protection played a key role in keeping the important trade artery open. Tang supplies of silk to their garrisons brought in large quantities of silk to Central Asia and provided the wherewithal for local trade exchanging silk for other items—from jade to relics. During the early part of the fifteenth century large armadas commanded by the Ming admiral Zheng He sailed through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, often punishing pirates and occasionally even interfering in dynastic disputes in Indonesia and Sri Lanka. The Chinese coins he introduced to the region became the model for regional rulers to mint and helped facilitate inter-regional commerce. Southeast Asian rulers actively promoted trade with Asian neighbors as it brought them prosperity and security. The concept of the ocean as a common good that helped connect all was developed long before Hugo Grotius codified such a freedom. Major port cities in Asia were the emporia where not only traded objects but art, artefacts, and religious texts were exchanged. Palembang in Sumatra, for example, was not only a bustling port but a renowned center of Buddhist study where Chinese and South Asian scholars encountered and exchanged translated Buddhist canons.

During the era of European colonial rule in Asia the catch-all terms “Asians” or sometimes “Asiatics” were used to name all non-whites in the region. Today it is often used in a pejorative sense, but originally the term gave a common group identification to the population who had long known and dealt with each other. The millennial-long Asian tradition of seafaring mobility received a cruel boost from the colonial plantation economy when Indians, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Filipino workers were shipped to different parts of Asia and the world, creating a new class of Asian bonded and slave laborers. It is thus understandable that Asia developed an articulated common identity in their reaction to European attitudes. Developing an “us versus them” approach helped Asians unite against the common European colonial yoke.

THE COLONIAL CONNECTIONS

Colonial rule and interests of European trade led to the re-integration of the region's economy on external terms. The 1860s witnessed a convergence of trade expansion and technological transformation with trains, steamships, and telegraphs connecting Asia under colonial rulers. French commercial interests in Indochina established shipping links between Haiphong, Hong Kong, Saigon, and Singapore. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which reduced the distance between London and Mumbai by 41% and London and Singapore by 29%, gave the inter-Asian commerce a further boost. The transformation of shipping by replacing wooden-hulled sailing ships with steel-hulled steamers not only increased the carrying capacity but finally ended reliance on the monsoon winds. The expansion of the submarine cable network in the late nineteenth century spread the telegraph before radio emerged to disseminate information of the region. Shocked by the arrival of Commodore Perry of the US Navy, Japan undertook a frenetic building of railroads and ports. By 1895 Japan had laid more than 4000 miles of railway tracks and telegraph lines and developed coastal shipping networks. Japan's new possessions on the Chinese mainland, Korea and Taiwan and in the Pacific islands, were linked by railway, telegraph, and shipping networks. News and images of these distant lands were presented to the people of Japan and were central to the pan-Asian imperial project that set-out to integrate them into a "mesh of empire."¹⁹

Ironically, colonial rule helped develop some cohesion among Asians by introducing European languages that allowed the multi-lingual elite populations of Asia to easily communicate with others. Pan-Asianism—the doctrine that called for Asian unity—was formulated by Japanese and Indian intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century as a response to Western domination. Authors like Okawa Shumei saw an underlying unity among the different Asian societies—a spiritual, moral, and timeless essence—which was opposed to Western civilization. Those writers, philosophers, and spiritual leaders like Rabindranath Tagore, Okakura Kakuzo, or Swami Vivekananda who called for Asian unity did so in English.

Anthony Milner points out that:

¹⁹Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, 'Empires and the reach of the global', in Emily S. Rosenberg, ed, *A World Connecting, 1870–1945* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 353–354.

Such thinking about ‘Asia’ did not develop independently in India or Japan. There were relationships between the ideologues working across the Asian region. Vivekandanda, for instance, visited Japan; Okakura spent a year in India. Tagore knew of Okakura and was certainly impressed by him: ‘it was from Okakura,’ explained Tagore, ‘that we first came to know there was such a thing as an Asiatic mind.’ Tagore himself traveled to Japan, China and many parts of Southeast Asia, establishing numerous relationships with leading thinkers in these societies.²⁰

But as western writing about Asia spread, some Japanese saw Asia as “a place of backwardness, stagnation, subjugation, and disorganization” and not an ideal identity for Japan. Influential authors like Fukuzawa Yukichi called for Japan to “leave Asia and turn to the West.”²¹ But as Eric Hotta puts it, “many Japanese Pan-Asianists, aware of their country’s unique position as almost the only Asian country that had escaped colonization, came to believe that Japan had a special mission to save weak Asia from Western domination.”²² It was Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905 that contributed to transforming Japanese world view from “leave Asia” to “re-enter Asia.”

The rising political consciousness and awareness of the region’s rich historical and cultural legacy contributed to creating national identities, the strongest of which—Japan—sought to turn towards an expansionism, claiming to be the leader of Asian civilization. Japan argued that as their economic and military modernization had not only strengthened their nation but had also given them insights about Western civilization and its weaknesses, they were best placed to be the leader of a resurgent Asia and build a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.” Japanese newspaper editors argued that given the danger of Western colonization, it was imperative for Japan as their leader to bring them into the modern era without destroying their traditions. Historian Prasenjit Duara notes, “Increasingly after the Russo-Japanese War, however, the view that Japan was the only Asian nation capable of rescuing Asia and harmonizing East

²⁰Anthony Milner, ‘Asia’ Consciousness and Asian Values’, 2015, *op cit*.

²¹Sven Saaler, *Pan-Asianism in Meiji and Taishō Japan – A Preliminary Framework*, Working paper 02/04, 2002, at: http://www.dijtokyo.org/publications/PanAsianismusSaaler_WP.pdf.

²²Eri Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan’s War 1931–1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3.

and West civilizations began to take hold.” However, calls for Asian unity and organizing of Asian People’s conferences in Nagasaki (1926) and in Shanghai (1927) had little impact on the Chinese and Koreans facing Japanese aggression. “Yellow Peril” was used by Japan as an excuse for military expansion.

Not surprisingly Japan’s brutal rule in the name of Asian solidarity helped to dispel the dream of Asia for Asians. In post war years the newly emergent nation states sought to define their own identities and national interests based on ethnicity, religion, and language. The spread of media and education, especially among the nascent middle classes in Asian colonies like India and Indonesia, spawned nationalist movements which, despite limitations, created an incipient pan-Asian sentiment—supporting each other’s movements. The Indian Congress sent medical help to the Chinese Communist Party and the Bandung Conference (1955) brought together anti-colonial leaders of Asia and Africa.

But as the region developed, economic necessities of both Asian and foreign powers led to the rise of pan-Asian organizations like the Asian Development Bank. It was an extension of the Bretton Woods system that was built by Western powers in the post-war years. Western economic philosophy and the political-military power that influenced most of Asia (except for China, Vietnam, and North Korea) dominated political, economic, and cultural institutions that were tagged Asian. Similar to emergent Japan in the 1930s, however, rising Southeast Asian tigers in the 1990s sought to define Asia by their growing economic power. The economic clout of East and Southeast Asia received international acclaim when in 1993 the World Bank released its much celebrated report, *The East Asian Miracle*.²³ It highlighted the common feature behind the growth in the regional countries’ “application of a set of common, market-friendly economic policies, leading to both higher accumulation and better allocation of resources.”

Southeast Asian leaders, notably Singapore’s founder Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia’s leader Mahathir Mohamed, claimed credit for the economic success of their countries based on their cultural values and became the spokespeople for Asia. They claimed Asia’s strength came from the very aspects Japanese intellectuals had once blamed for Asia’s backwardness.

²³N. Birdsall et al, *The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy, A World Bank Policy Research Report* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 1993).

They rejected Western individualism in favor of Asian communitarianism, which gave primacy to familial duty and community obligation. The leaders proclaimed that the Confucianism that permeated societies like Singapore, Hong Kong, or Taiwan played a key role in their economic success.²⁴ This pride in Asian philosophy and work ethics was accompanied by an anti-Western sentiment of leaders like Mahathir who championed the creation of the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) that would leave out the United States. It was pointedly set-up as a counter-organization to the US-sponsored Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. In the end, the EAEC idea was quietly buried.

ASIANIZATION OF ASIA

Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, Yoichi Funabashi reflected the growing self-confidence of non-Communist Asia and called for greater integration of the region, which he called “Asianization of Asia.” He argued that increased intra-Asian ties and cooperation could strengthen the new world order. The region’s dynamic growth, emerging middle class, gradual democratization, self-help discipline, open regionalism, self-confidence, and healthy optimism can all be positive factors in shaping the new world order.”²⁵ However, the self-confidence of the region and faith in Confucian ethics promoting growth was shattered by the 1997–1999 financial crisis that ravaged the region. Licking its wounds, the region returned to its old institutions like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, and sought growing cooperation with China, which remained largely unscathed by the crisis. The currency swap agreement reached among ASEAN countries, China, and Japan—the Chiang Mai initiative—strengthened Asian solidarity. It also gave China an opportunity to present itself as a true friend of the region when the Western countries turned their backs to the region, blaming Asia’s “crony capitalism.”

²⁴Some critics, however, pointed out that “Confucianism was so weak in Singapore that when the government launched a Religious Knowledge curriculum in the schools, with particular emphasis on Confucianism, foreign Confucian experts had to be flown into the country for three weeks in 1982,” Mark R. Thompson, “The survival of “Asian values” as “Zivilisationskritik,”” *Theory and Society*, vol 29, 651–686, (2000).

²⁵Yoichi Funabashi, “The Asianization of Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 5, November–December (1993), 84.

China's economic rise followed the country's entry to the World Trade Organization in 2000 and opened a new chapter in the reemergence of the Asian economy under China's leadership. China's 2011 Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN gave the East (Asian region) new strength.

Along with China's access to the world market, several historical and economic factors came into play in creating what has been called "Factory Asia".²⁶ The growing connections between China and Southeast Asia over the past centuries bore fruit not only for the region but for China as well. Ever since China opened its economy in 1978 and renewed appeals to overseas Chinese communities to help the motherland, there has been a massive flow of overseas Chinese foreign direct investment, or FDI, with some of it from Southeast Asia. Thanks to the steady migration of the Chinese, riding on trade, Southeast Asia is home for some 25 million ethnic Chinese, giving China formidable resources of soft power. China's new leading economic role in Asia followed that of Japan.

The rise of Japanese industry and investment in production facilities in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and then Southeast Asia in the 1980s created the conditions for region-wide economic development. Following the Plaza Accord that revalued Japanese currency, Japanese manufacturers spread out to the region creating a web of production networks. Growth of port and hub cities in Southeast Asia (following the historic pattern that we have seen in the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries) and the development of a vertically integrated production chain allowed the region's integration into a vast trade network that eventually came to center on China. With over 60% of Asian trade consisting of intermediate goods that were often produced in the region and assembled in China for export to the West, China emerged as the core of Factory Asia.

The spectacular rise of Chinese power in some ways placed it in a similar position as was the rising Japan vis-a-vis the rest of Asia in the early twentieth century. The parallel becomes more prominent as China takes on the mantle of the defender of Asian interests against the West, especially the United States, complete with the familiar slogan, "Asia for the Asians." Though China has not established its military superiority in the way Japan did by defeating Czarist Russia, its four trillion dollar foreign reserve and its

²⁶Claudia Canals, "China, at the heart of "Factory Asia", June 5, 2014, Caixa Bank Research, Monthly Report, accessed January 23, 2016, at: <http://www.caixabankresearch.com/en/1406im-d2-es>.

fast growing military muscle (from anti-carrier missiles, stealth fighters, and aircraft carriers) enables it to lay claim to pan-Asian leadership.

Until the early part of this century, China's foreign policy was guided by Deng Xiaoping's cautious doctrine of "tao guang yang hui" (hide one's capacities and bide one's time) and "jue bu dang tou" (don't seek leadership). China has indeed avoided taking the lead in international issues, focusing its effort instead on quietly building its strength. Explaining the change in China's position, Chinese scholar Wang Jishi notes that the proponents of a more pro-active, robust policy believe that "this notion, [of not taking the lead] which Deng put forward more than 20 years ago, may no longer be appropriate now that China is far more powerful." The 2007–08 global financial crisis that rocked Western countries but left China virtually unscathed has boosted China's pride and encouraged it to take a more assertive role. Expressing the new confidence Fudan university professor Zhang Weiwei notes, "The United States is like a planet with many satellites around it. But its system is on the decline. China is more like a fixed star that has experienced thousands of years and traveled in its orbit." China's brimming self-confidence was expressed by senior colonel Liu Mingfu, who teaches at the People's Liberation Army's National Defense University. Liu stated that replacing the United States as the world's top military power should be China's goal. Since the United States is currently the dominant military power in Asia the clear implication was for China to become the regional hegemon.

China's plans to dominate the region militarily was evident in its growing challenge to Japan over the control of Senkakus or Diaoyu islands by an unilateral declaration of an Air-Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, and the beginning of a massive program of reclaiming land (about 2000 acres of dry land since 2014) to create artificial islands and military installations in the South China Sea. China has been explicit in its claim that it owns all the features of South China Sea—between 80 and 90% of the 3.6 million square kilometers of the South China Sea—that it considers to have sovereignty over. Even though, under the UN Law of the Sea (to which China is party), man-made constructions cannot be used to claim sovereignty. On September 15, 2015 Chinese Vice Admiral Yuan Yubai, commander of the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) North Sea Fleet, told an international conference "the South China Sea, as the name indicates, is a sea area that belongs to China" and it has done so since the Han Dynasty in 206 B.C. To enforce its claim of sovereignty China began shoos away fishing vessels from waters close to

the artificial islands, even though it does not fall into China's exclusive economic zone. In a speech delivered in China in December 2015, US Admiral Scott Swift said, "Intimidated by the manner in which some navies, coast guards and maritime military enforce claims in contested waters, fishermen who trawled the seas freely for generations are facing threats to their livelihoods imposed by nations with unresolved, and often unrecognized, claims."²⁷

ASIAN COMMUNITY OF COMMON DESTINY

China has expressed its annoyance at US attempts to challenge China's expansive claim of sovereignty, as demonstrated by sailing US warships within the 12 miles claimed as territorial waters around an artificial island built by China. But this voyage has not prevented Chinese officials from reasserting its claim. On October 10, 2015, a "senior Chinese military official" told *Newsweek*: "There are 209 land features still unoccupied in the South China Sea and we could seize them all." The following day a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman stated, "We will never allow any country to violate China's territorial waters and airspace in the Spratly Islands, in the name of protecting freedom of navigation." At a political level, though, Chinese leaders have sought to assure the United States that it is not seeking to oust American power from the region. Thus, President Xi Jinping assured Washington (May 17, 2015), "The broad Pacific Ocean is vast enough to embrace both China and the United States."²⁸

While continuing its military expansion, China has tried to woo countries of the region with the promise of its economic largesse. In October 2013 Xi Jinping launched an initiative to jointly build the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the twenty-first century "Maritime Silk Road" (hereafter, the Belt and Road), which effectively covers all of Asia and Central Asia with its arteries fanning outward towards Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. As Xi Jinping told the Boao Forum, "The interests of Asian countries have become intertwined, and a community of common destiny has increasingly taken shape." He recalled (clearly with Chinese aid

²⁷Jane Perlez, "U.S. Navy Commander Implies China Has Eroded Safety of South China Sea," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/16/world/asia/us-navy-commander-implies-china-has-eroded-safety-of-south-china-sea.html>.

²⁸Agence France-Presse, May 17, 2015

to Southeast Asian countries during the 1997 crisis in mind) that in hard times “the people of Asian countries have always come to those in need with a helping hand and worked together to overcome one challenge after another, demonstrating the power of unity in [the] face of difficulties and the spirit of sharing weal and woe.” He said that one must see the whole picture and jointly build “a regional order that is more favorable to Asia and the world. To this end, in 2015 China launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The AIIB with its \$100 billion fund-lending in Asia’s energy and power, transport and telecoms, rural infrastructure, water supply, and environmental protection is seen by some as “creating an infrastructure bank that will knit Asia into a Sino-centric economic order.”²⁹ Despite US opposition to its western allies joining the bank, the AIIB attracted fifty-seven founding members, including Britain, France, and Germany.

Xi’s formulation of Asia as a “community of common destiny” is poetic, but one suspects that the destiny that China has in mind may not be exactly what most countries would like to pursue. What has marked the Asian community—minus China, Vietnam, and North Korea—is an acceptance of democracy, secularism, and openness.³⁰ Lofty words aside, China’s actual conduct does not demonstrate much respect for the sovereignty of other countries or diversity of opinions and values. In a telling episode during an ASEAN meeting in Hanoi in 2010 the Chinese foreign minister chided Singapore for making a critical remark, reminding the island’s foreign minister that it was a small country. There have been many occasions when China pressured regional countries against entertaining not just the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama but authors like Jun Chang who are critical of China. In an audacious extraterritorial move in late 2015 Chinese security services kidnapped and spirited away four publishers—Hong Kong residents (two of them holding foreign passports)—to stand

²⁹Yuriko Koike, “What is China’s strategy with the AIIB?,” Project Syndicate, accessed on January 22, 2016 <http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/05/what-is-chinas-strategy-with-the-aib/>.

³⁰Zhang, Yunling, *China and Asian Regionalism* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., 2010), 4.

accused in China.³¹ Beijing used its economic and military clout to force Southeast Asian countries to repatriate Uighur dissidents.³² Although most Asian countries have embraced the democratic system and varying degrees of freedom of press and expression, China has shown unrelenting opposition to the inclusion of democratic Taiwan in the Asian community and increasingly clamped down on simple freedom of expression in the mainland.

THE TRUMP FACTOR

With President Donald Trump throwing a gauntlet at China over Taiwan, the need for China to mobilize the region is greater than ever. But rising tension between the United States and China and the unpredictability of Mr. Trump would also make Asians more cautious about responding to China's "Asia for Asians" call.

Mr. Trump, the businessman who prides himself as the most brilliant dealmaker, would also have no time for dealing with Asia as a collective. In his disdain for trade agreements he has rejected the long-negotiated Trans-Pacific Partnership which, ironically, would have united part of prosperous Asia with the United States and could have had the effect of isolating China. The author of the best-selling *Art of the Deal* wants to negotiate with China alone and that too throwing to the wind the long-established policy of One China. While Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan remains a core issue for Beijing, Mr. Trump threatens to reopen the issue if China does not make trade concessions or change its South China Sea policy. That Mr. Trump was keen to reopen the question of Taiwan, at least as a bargaining chip, was clear when he held a phone conversation (the first ever by a US president-elect) with Taiwan's president and justified it as a normal course involving a major trade partner. Since then Mr. Trump has doubled down on the threat by baldly stating in an interview with the *Wall*

³¹Philip We, "Hong Kong bookseller disappearances spark widespread anger and alarm," *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 24, 2016, accessed <http://www.smh.com.au/world/hong-kong-bookseller-disappearances-spark-widespread-anger-and-alarm-20160121-gmbfvv.html>.

³²Brian Gruber, "Cambodia Praises Thailand for Deporting Uighurs to China," *Khmer Times*, July 16, 2015. Accessed on January 24 <http://www.khmertimeskh.com/news/13382/cambodia-praises-thailand-for-deporting-uighurs-to-china/>.

Street Journal that “everything is under negotiation, including One China.” But for Beijing One China policy is “non-negotiable.” While China has officially not responded to a comment by private citizen Mr. Trump, the state media has warned of China taking off its gloves.

Mr. Trump’s nominee for Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, criticized China’s artificial island and base building and angered Beijing by threatening, in effect, a blockade of Chinese-occupied islands in the South China Sea. Whether mere bluster or an actual plan of action, the Trump administration’s approach to China and South China is likely to produce two consequences.

In 2016 Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Malaysia cozied up to China seeing it as an inexorably rising power. But against the backdrop of rising tensions between China and the United States, they might reconsider their position and adopt a more neutral stance. The traditional Asian fear of grass being trampled when elephants fight could come into play and make them more cautious about siding with China.

Second, China’s increasing muscle-flexing in South China Sea and East Sea vis-à-vis South Korea and Japan and signs of Mr. Trump’s lack of concern about regional security could prod countries to strengthen their security cooperation. Already, Australia has initiated moves to strengthen cooperation with Japan, Singapore, and South Korea. This may not be conducive to creating “One Asia” of all democratic countries yet may help to foster a unity of sorts against common threat.

China’s dramatic construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea and expansion of its military control in blatant disregard of international law and even the code of conduct it signed with its neighbors makes a mockery of any talk of common destiny. In light of China’s comportment with its neighbor, its claim to speak on behalf of Asians can only raise concerns about its motives.

Addressing a security conference in September 2015, Xi Jinping revived the slogan “Asia for the Asians” that Japan had raised in the period leading to its war against the United States. “Matters in Asia ultimately must be taken care of by Asians, Asia’s problems ultimately must be resolved by Asians, and Asia’s security ultimately must be protected by Asians,” Xi said. However, at this time, Asian countries were increasingly worried about China’s expansionist moves. While stepping up their military modernization, they were also quietly urging the United States to come to their support. As one scholar noted, “‘Asia for the Asians’ strategy is not likely to

succeed, in large measure because many regional powers will see it not as ‘Asia for the Asians’ but as ‘Asia for the Chinese’.”³³

Two millennia of Asia’s history show that diversity has been its major source of strength. Tolerance and a pragmatic live-and-let-live policy have provided the cultural underpinnings for the region’s economic success. Japan’s disastrous attempt at turning a culturally “One Asia” into a political tool and claiming leadership of this vast continent remains a cautionary tale for any country harboring similar ambitions. Asia is one and would remain so because of its long connected history as part of a globalized world and not because of the hegemonic efforts by any single country. As we have seen, throughout its long history the Asian continent developed its special identity through its diversity. Growing global connections that ran through trade, religion, and migration, strengthened through port cities and exposure to the world at large, prepared Asia for its role as the world’s factory. Any attempt to put the continent into a political straitjacket, opposes the trend of globalization, or coerce it through military means will not only ruin Asia’s DNA of open collaboration and tolerance but also produce a backlash.

³³Scott Harold, “‘Asia for the Asians’: A Foreign Policy Gloss with Little Appeal to Other Asians,” The American Foreign Policy Council Defense Technology Program Brief, February 2015, No. 9.



<http://www.springer.com/978-981-10-4976-7>

The Future of East Asia

Hayes, P.; Moon, C.-I. (Eds.)

2018, XV, 318 p. 2 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-981-10-4976-7