

Histories of Illusion: Another Asian Century Beckons

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It is an old debate on fictions. St. Augustine, in his lengthy and at times revealing scribbles, proposed that humans were placed on this earth for a purpose. Disappointing it must be to then discover that humans have no purpose at all, the sort of accidental matter that coexist with Mother Nature's musical furniture. They simply are. This brute simplicity is not something that measures for the historians who see value in movement and process, the classic error in wishing to draw moisture out of sand, and sweetness out of salt.

Nonetheless, it gives soothsayers, policy makers and international relations commentators a lot of material to work with. The international system has magical ciphers that can be picked and read. There are signs. The next century must belong to some country, as if ownership is something that can be pinched in futuristic terms.

The latest talk show babble doing the heated rounds is the idea that, with a strange conjunction of newly elected leaders in the Asia Pacific, that we are facing yet another "Asian Century". This, it might be said, is a century that has been in the wings for sometime, gathering dust. The American century (more of that later) was stripping, fighting, and bellowing for much of the last century, and so it comes down to the question as to who else was willing to stride into view. The powers of the Asian region are certainly interested, but their resumes were shortened by an assortment of financial crisis and political squabbles.

In 2012, the Australian Government, succumbing to slogan and supposition, decided what the country would be doing in *Australia in the Asian Century*.^[1] The Prime Minister then, Julia Gillard, decided to read the tarot cards. "Predicting the future is fraught with risk, but the greater risk is in failing to plan for our destiny. As a nation, we face a choice: to drift into our future or to actively shape it."

The White paper is revealing, showing Australia to be a keen man servant for Asian needs. (It is worth nothing here the usual ignorance that accompanies such announcements: what is "Asia" in this?) The point, however, is assumed: the Asian century is upon us, even if it has no form or tangible means of being grasped. "In this century, the region in which we live will become home to most of the world's middle class. Our region will be the world's largest producer of goods and services and the largest consumer of them."

There have been three charging forces who have been selected as significant in this regard.

They are the starlets on the political scene - the two, at least functional democracies, India and Indonesia, and then the People's Republic of China, distinctly not democratic but very keen in buying into the fashion walk of political talk. That these should all be lumped together in a conversation about a "century" should puzzle all.

The three certainly have promising leaders, though a leader's promise remains a deep frozen contingency till something appears, or at the very least thaws, on the record. President Joko Widodo of Indonesia, for all his regional experience, remains grinningly virginal; India's Narendra Modi is still doing the rounds convincing people that he will not metamorphose into a Hindu nationalist fiend rounding up Muslims; and China's Xi Jinping is busying himself with the fad of reform in Beijing while nodding vigorously to the tradition of Deng Xiaoping.

President Xi has certainly made sounds along the line of building bridges with India for "an Asian century of prosperity". Eyes are focused keenly on a declining West - an ailing European Union, a United States that is running out of puff. But what tends to rupture the prospects of ordered collaboration lies in those traditional power disagreements: strong leaders do not necessarily imply wise heads. Territorial disputes remain a flash point, with the only stimulant drawing all together trade. (Tediously, we have Modinomics, Abenomics, and, wait for it to come, Jokonomics.)

Such optimism for centuries has precedents. Henry R. Luce of *Time* magazine spoke famously of The American Century, the sort of holy water that was bound to stick in the corridors of power. He was writing in February 1941, some months before the first Japanese bombs began falling on Pearl Harbour. The non-interventionists were still holding court over imminent US involvement in the Second World War. "Consider the 20th Century," he seemed to thunder. "It is not only in the sense that we happen to live in it but ours also because it is America's first century as a dominant power in the world." [2] Hence, the idea that time is a form of historical real estate you can pinch.

The African hopefuls, flush from post-colonial release, were such individuals as Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah. They inspired a sense that another era beckoned on the continent. The African literature set was mandatory reading for any socialist, champagne or otherwise, for several years. Then the project soured, and the champagne flattened. The corpses, the ruined states, the emptied treasuries, and the torture chambers all somehow took away from the glossy optimism. Colonial powers were brutal, but leaders educated in the manners of the colonists simply knew better. Such "decades" or "centuries" suggest far more problems than solutions. It excites the brutes.

Last year, in another act of re-invention, there were a spate of articles speculating about African growth, and whether there would be an "African century" in due course. [3] Oliver August, writing for *The Economist*, could even claim that he travelled 15,800 miles over Africa's roads without once being solicited for a bribe. But even such speculation had to come with disabusing notions of uneven growth, singular characteristics between the powers, and various regimes. For Todd Moss, head of the Emerging Africa Project at the Centre for Global Development, Africa might be "big and important and historically different from the past", but "the dominant trend is divergence among countries" (*Foreign Policy*, Mar 29, 2013). They, it seems, will have to wait.

Certainly, the entire business of finding centuries that have yet to happen takes medieval mysticism and eschatology to another level. Instead of having European proselytisers leading us on a child crusade, we have a deodorized public relations expert loving pie charts and graphic projections, drinking too much coffee at in a think-tank office with dubious funding links. "The next century will have..." More pie charts, more hopeful figures that will never eventuate. Companies, excited, up stakes and rush with capital and bank assets to a

region that will, in time, become the next scented wonder of the financial world.

The failing soothsayers tend to eventually fall over, replaced by another bunch of tea leaf readers. At the heart of such predictions is a terrible, and in some cases disturbing desire to streamline and find the catch-all idea: that economic growth can be measured like a sporting league table. Those economists have held sway for too long. The same goes for the international relations non-experts, who presume, without cause, that difference does not produce conflict.

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Notes

[1] http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/verve/_resources/australia-in-the-asian-century-white-paper.pdf

[2] <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article6139.htm>

[3] http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/29/the_african_century_growth_-_democracy_governance

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