

Against the Asian Century

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Abstract:

Discourse surrounding a supposed “Asian Century” has gained much prominence in recent decades, especially as Asian nations and peoples have become wealthier and more militarily and politically powerful. However, the fundamental precepts of any “Asian Century,” as a heuristic device, are non-Asian and antithetical to how Asia has been lived in the past and continues to be lived in the present. By “Asia,” I do not mean an integrated, pan-Asianist whole so much as a place where western European ideologies do not have the same organizing power as in those ideologies’ homeland. In particular, the idea of an “Asian Century” is Hegelian, which is a philosophy alien to most of Asia. In this paper, I interrogate the Hegelian bases of the notion of globally-alternating “centuries” and suggest, in closing, that survey work on Asian values may be a way to disrupt the totalizing discourse of any “Asian Century.”

Keywords: Asian Century; American Century; Hegelianism; Eurasianism; Asianism Retold

Introduction

The term “Asian Century” has become a mainstay of global discourse, even in Asia (see, e.g., Khanna 2019, Nagorski 2020, Mahbubani 2022, West 2025). The premise of an “Asian century” is not Asian, however. Before the “Asian Century,” Parag Khanna argues, there was an American one. And before that a European one. This kind of conceptualization should give scholars of Asia pause. Asia, however one defines the land and people that dominate the massive Eurasian continent, may be rising, coming to dominate the century in which we find ourselves, but the roots of thinking in terms of “centuries” belonging to global powers turning on a carousel of geopolitical primacy are sunk deep in the West.

The irony of the “Asian century” is that it conceals, and perpetuates, a decidedly non-Asian—that is, western European—set of assumptions about history, economics, human societies, and more. Such geohistorical and geopolitical polarity, which is said occasionally to shift as “centuries” shuffle around the globe, is alien to Asia as non-West. Talk of an Asian century, whether from the lips and pens of Asians or not, is premised on totalizing geopolitical schemes which do not find expression or origin in Asian—that is, non-far-west-Eurasian—historical or cultural modalities (see Wallerstein 2004, 42).

Hegelianism, the Basis of the “Asian Century,” Was Born Anti-Asian, Anti-Non-Western

To recapitulate Asia-themed discourses from centuries past, there is no singular “Asia” in the first place that might rise to global hegemony. Those who speak of an “Asian century” seem to presume an “Asia” that can possess or drive a century, but what or where or whom that “Asia” connotes is not often clear. There are no centuries to swap for swaths of the globe, either. There are, instead, sensibilities deeply rooted in the part of Eurasia outside of its western European appendix, ideas and practices of negotiation, integration, implication in social hierarchies, unfolding and multivalent narratives of belonging, and the strong subsistence of the family and other local communities within political frameworks anchored in centralized governments (Subrahmanyam 2016). In such an array, the distinction between Asia and non-Asia loses meaning, as arrangements in Asia tend to be inclusive of a theoretically infinite range of persons, all of whom find some place, qua persons, within the negotiation- and cooperation-rich societal fabrics by which Asia is characterized (see, e.g., Morris 1968). On closer inspection, the very idea of an “Asian Century” is undone by the realities of Eurasia itself. What is to be bound together by “Asian century” rhetoric disappears at a finer grain than that of the highly abstract.

Further, the notion of a century belonging to or being driven by a hemisphere or continent is predicated on Western dominance of global historiography (Annō 2023; Karatani 2005, 111-112). The fact that wars are not “world” wars unless Europeans fight in them should give some sense of the depth of the pathology, and should alert careful scholars to the perils of trafficking in Western-minted totalizing ideologies (Mishra 2020, 45-60). Even when made generic, as when time is used to bundle peoples and events into discrete units, the concept of a “century” (in the sense of an “Asian Century” or an “American Century”) is alien to non-Western worlds (Richard 2021). As, some say, an “Asian century” rises, what is being concealed in the ascent is the severity of Eurocentrism that still seeks to set the tone of historiographical analysis even into the present.

Especially problematic here is the capital-H History posited by German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). Under a Hegelian view of history, History is a superhuman force, a stand-in for divinity, which has the power to move events and people in ways conducive to “progress.” “History itself,” writes historian Priya Satia, critiquing modes of Western historicizing, “is a form of mythologizing” (Satia 2020, 55). Seen in this light, the spirit of History moves and ranges at will, alighting on this or that hemisphere or continent in a way best suited to advance the agenda of History-driven “history,” a derivative thing divorced from human societies. The Hegelian abstraction on which “Asian century” discourse is predicated erases the very “Asia” that it would endue with ownership of a planetary time span of one hundred years. Even on the compartmentalized world-historical view, wherein non-Western peoples appear to be given their due, Western historical schematics flatten Eurasian worlds into civilizational pendula (Toynbee and Caplan, 1972; Spengler 1927).

In this Hegelian world-historical mechanism, non-Western peoples and societies are automatically implicated into the Hegelian thrust, with History converting various histories—local, personal, literary, cultural, religious, and even national—into the same totalizing History moving across the

globe, exchanging non-Western people, places, things, and ideas for Western ones, *ad infinitum* (see, e.g., Calichman 2021, 57-106). Hegel, the spell-caster of History, does not leave room for speculation: he explicitly places the Eurasian civilizational lodestars China and India “outside the World’s History” (Hegel 1902, 121). Latter-day Hegelians, by the same token, declared “history” to be approaching its end when the nations of the world appeared to be converging on the Hegelian focal point of liberal democracy (Fukuyama 1992). The latter-day Hegelians did so in almost complete ignorance of the parts of the world outside of far western Eurasia and North America. What happened in a handful of Western capitals was enough, on their view, to define the entirety of a planet and a century of time on it.

In seeking to outfox Hegelian history from the inside, non-Western societies become entrapped in the Hegelian rat race, too (Lu 2019; see also Watanabe 2013 and Yang, ed., 2019). A “clash” of centuries premised on a struggle for control of a global age is just the kind of Hegelian playacting that has obscured small-“h” history on the ideological register of western Eurasian abstraction. The “Asian Century” is, at bottom, simply a revamping of this old Hegelian idea of History arranging the events of the world teleologically, even eschatologically. And the root and ruler of History-derived “history” is always, on the Hegelian reading, Europe and North America.

I reject this view of “history” and call for a return to history as a multivalent, many-sourced, multiply-interpreted, ever-emerging understanding, constantly negotiated and renegotiated in real time as part of the interactions among people, peoples, memories, and ideas. There was never an American century, and there will never be an Asian century. The world, especially non-European Eurasia, is far too complex for that. What there are, to return to the scope of this paper, are Eurasian peoples, cultures, religions, and lived realities. These need not and ought not be read up into a Hegelian world-bestrident paradigm, for, in doing so, the very locality of Eurasia is denied (Kuwabara et al., eds., 1963, 154-168). The notion of an “American century” or another kind of Colossal “century” is itself ahistorical, a pure ideology blown into the complexity of the past. *A fortiori* for Eurasia or anywhere else. I join Pankaj Mishra in acclaiming the exclamation of “Indian sociologist Benoy Kumar Sarkar,” who “warned against the historical ‘dogma that naturally accrues to domineering and triumphant races’” (Mishra 2012, 40). In trading in “Asian Century” discourse, we give credence to the West’s “historical ‘dogma’” and encourage the West’s naturalized assumption of being a “domineering and triumphant race [].”

(Up)Setting the Stage: Decentering Asia by Dislodging Globally-Embedded Western Ideologies

Whereas the idea of a century under the sway of this or that hemisphere or global hegemon is premised on Western assumptions of absolute sovereignties in impenetrable nation-state shells—the very portrait of Westphalia—I counter that Eurasian sensibilities eschew balance-of-power thinking in favor of the much greater power of balance, continuously negotiating among people, groups, and traditions in search of a working harmony of non-abstract, non-theoretical engagements (Abrams 2020, 410). Asian values do not give rise to centuries. The notion of centuries wheeling around the

globe is an extension of Hegelian revolution-driven dialectics (Löwith 1964, 26-29). If anything, the notion of centuries of domination suppresses the much more localized power-brokering at which Eurasian cultures and histories have proven to excel.

Recent scholarship challenges such Hegelian pieties. This scholarship in turn recovers previous insights which have been disregarded heretofore as inconsistent with Hegelian triumphalism and Western world-dominance. Scholars working in this vein upset Western-dominated assumptions of History and its “centuries” and point a way toward replacing them with new, non-centric, localizing, diachronic, open-ended (toward both the future and the past), and dynamic ways of understanding how human beings both change and remain integral over time.

Mana Kia’s 2020 book *Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin before Nationalism* is an excellent introduction to such non-Western, non-Hegelian historical studies. In the heart of the volume, Kia writes, referring to a signal idea of Edward Said (1935-2003), that “Orientalism’s production of alterity [...] made what was conflictual threatening” (Kia 2020, 90). Kia writes also of Mughals among Persianate worlds “embod[ying] the aporetic status of transregionally mobile Persians, simultaneously strangers to the particular and intimates of the universal” (Kia 2020, 101). But “Persianate universalism was not specific to Hindustan,” Kia writes. By this, Kia does not mean to “preclude the search for regional specificities,” but rather merely to

demand[] that [the search] be undertaken from a ground more justified than modern (proto-nationalist) assumptions. Asking how eighteenth-century Persians understood origin and named affiliation and difference is a starting point, both for setting aside these assumptions and for thinking about what was shared transregionally. These commonalities are thus the basis for a reconsideration of regional specificities. They allow for reconceptualizing the link between origin and belonging, and, perhaps, reappraising reified boundaries that produce hybridity (Kia 2020, 101).

Persian histories, like Arabic and many other non-Western histories, offer a challenge to the Hegelian worldview, itself resting on a deep foundation of Western epistemological and culturo-religious assumptions (see, e.g., Flatt 2019, 36).

But not just Persian or Arabic histories. Instructive here is one of Kia’s endnotes, namely a quote by historian Joan Scott. Kia quotes Scott:

When any taken-for-granted idea or established fact is understood to be an interpretation of reality rather than reality itself, its history can be written by specifying its operations and resurrecting its forgotten alternatives. It is not, then, an inevitable consequence of the march of time, but a set of options that prevailed by ruling out others. The result of this kind of enquiry is an opening to reinterpretation (Kia 2020, 210, endnote 48, quoting Scott 2007, 28).

There is hope in these wisdoms presented by Kia and Scott. Read between the lines and they suggest that Hegelian History, by its very act of totalizing through distortion and erasure, sows the

seeds of its own undoing, producing marginalized and forgotten histories (small “h”) which undermine the grand sweep on which the Hegelians insist.

Persian and Arabic interventions point to an even bigger truth, namely that work of towering importance has been done toward deconstructing grand Hegelian narratives from the perspective of race. American historian Gerald Horne, for example, in his masterful book *White Supremacy Confronted*, decenters Europe and America from the histories of southern Africa, thereby, by extension, de-Hegelianizing what was once a bastion of Hegelian history, namely the writing of African history (Horne 2019). Although Horne does not mention Hegel in another volume, his 2017 book on settler colonialism, the subtext of Hegelian “history” and its iterations in white supremacy are ever in the background (Horne 2017). Horne has written on Asia as well, but one would be very hard pressed to imagine a simplistic “Asian Century” argument emerging from Horne’s historical (small “h”) mindset (Horne 2004). Work by historian Yuichiro Onishi and other scholars of trans-Pacific race studies is also important for viewing histories from other than an a priori Hegelian viewpoint (Onishi 2013). While not about race, Marlène Laruelle’s *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* is also a reminder that there is a strong push against Hegelian-globalist “historical” predetermination in the former Soviet Union (Laruelle 2012). Outside of far western Eurasia, Hegelian history appears to be on very shaky ground. The multipolarity framework introduced by many thinkers in Russia, China, and elsewhere is distinctly anti-Hegelian. “Asian century” discourse would appear to be an ideology belonging to, ironically, a century that has long since ended.

Mention of communist empire brings us back squarely to Hegelian sensibilities, however, for which we must once again turn to race scholars for complication. Robeson Taj Frazier’s 2015 *The East Is Black*, for instance, tells a story, still almost entirely unheeded in the West, of alternatives to white triumphalism in the Hegelian phantasmagoria commonly known as the “Cold War,” when “history” was frustrated by two competing strains of Hegelian world-dominating ideology (Frazier 2015). In gender studies, too, histories abound which challenge, often implicitly, pat renderings of “centuries” to be steered by this or that nation-state or region (often, as the “centuries” logic runs, under the control of men) (see, e.g., Sone 2023, Enari 2021, Hirai 2023, Svoboda 2009; Ikuta, ed., 2015). The Hegelianism underpinning the “Asian century” conceals very much more than it illuminates.

In offering resistance to the ideological assumptions of an “Asian Century,” I am especially drawn to the work of American philosopher W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), whose oeuvre, as Du Bois scholar Nahum Dimitri Chandler writes, “fundamentally questioned the dominant premises taking shape to define the post-World War II global order” (Chandler 2021, xi). That History and its horrors could cause splits in awareness is part of Du Bois’ main intellectual framing. The Duboisian “double consciousness” that colonization engenders is precisely the mechanism of “centuries” moving from one part of the globe to the other (Satia 2020, 246). The “Asian century,” in other words, is just double consciousness writ as large as Earth and across vast swaths of clock time. If there is to be an Asian century, or an American one, or belonging to some other arbitrary grouping, then there is also to be, as a concomitant, a group of people and countries not included in that grouping by definition

and design. Double consciousness as the flipside of Hegelianism is a powerful counterweight to “Asian history” discourse. I find hope, though, in “Du Bois’s critical affirmation of the differential articulation of historical profile, beyond the limits of modern colonial horizons or their aftermaths,” in part because this affirmation “was otherwise than retrospective” (Chandler 2021, xi). For Du Bois, Chandler continues, “the name Africa may be adduced as a theoretical metaphor that could propose a certain hyperbolic renarrativization of the systems of modern historicity, not only as pasts, but as futures” (Chandler 2021, xi; see also Chandler 2021, 107-108, endnote 2).

Du Bois’ “Africa” has profound implications for Eurasia as well. Chandler suggests “Asian century” as one possible way of opening up new paradigms of thought, in tandem with “Black horizon,” “new worlds of color,” and “African future” (Chandler 2021, 57). But here Chandler constrains by attempting to expand. It is laudable that Chandler wishes to dislodge Eurocentrism by rearranging historiographical inquiry along an “Asian century” idea. But there is more peril in the Hegelianization of history—into History—than insights to be gained by the distortion. I wish instead to follow Chandler when he notes that

the text of *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part which Africa Has Played in World History* was composed during and immediately following that fateful year of the twentieth century and world history, 1945—after the devastation unleashed at Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the first and only use of nuclear weapons in warfare, and thereafter the legal cessation of the hostilities marked as the declared end of the Second World War, the Great Pacific War” (Chandler 2021, 67, citing inter alia Du Bois 1947).

As counterpoint to Hegel’s dismissal of China and India as being outside of “History,” I offer Du Bois’ 1900 assessment of Asia as “the mother continent” (Chandler 2022, 178), and also of the hope he placed in Japan as challenger to the global problem of the color line (Chandler 2022, 180-181).

Eurasia as “Asian Century” Refutation

Further to interrogate the “Asian Century,” let us turn to Eurasia itself, where the work of memory (see Wood 1994) continues to open spaces for challenging Hegelian forward-charging History narratives. For example, the work of Franziska Seraphim and Carol Gluck, among others, has stressed the importance of lived memory in complicating historical records (Seraphim 2008; Gluck 2019). Hegelian History may tempt historians to interpret non-Western worlds in terms of Eurocentric categories and along Eurocentric, ideological lines, but the complexity of the past and the ways in which it is remembered are a reminder that “memory” is not so much a corrective to history as a compicator of History.

Psychological trauma in Asian history also sways the memories of wars and their aftermaths (Nakamura 2018; see also Yoshida 2017). Hayase Shinzō’s 2007 book on historical memory and Southeast Asia is part of his ongoing complication of nation-state-centric historical narratives (Hayase 2007; see also Asahi Shimbun Shuzaiban 2007, Harada 2013, and Fujiwara 2001). Inoue Yoshikazu’s 2019 book on how to confront the dead of future wars is a powerful exercise in memory

studies applied to what is to come, and should also be read as a corrective to Hegelian notions of an “Asian Century” or a century dominated by any other nation-state or regional force (Inoue 2019). South Korean literature scholar Park Yuha’s thoughtful work on “facing history” is a work of memory and the present which also complicates “Asian Century”-ism by foregrounding universal human (and only incidentally Eurasian) experiences (Park 2022). From the viewpoint of many inside of Eurasia, it is less important whether a century be “Asian” than whether lived experiences can be understood as universal in some way—that is, whether what happens in Korea or elsewhere in Eurasia is not Eurasian but simply human. The categories implied by Hegelian rotating centuries set up antinomies where none exist.

Going deeper into the Eurasian past, books such as Lúcio de Sousa and Oka Mihoko’s work on how European expansion into East Asia brought with it the enslavement of Japanese people are a stark reminder of the darkness—always present, always arguably dominant—of the high-Hegelian “Enlightenment” view of progress and history (de Sousa and Oka 2021). In this vein must also be mentioned Tim Harper’s *Underground Asia*, in which readers can confirm that Western exploitation of Eurasians has continued long past the historical scope of de Sousa and Oka’s book (Harper 2021; see also Clark 2015a, b, and c, and Iokibe et al., eds., 2020). Even at the level of policy debate, tensions between Hegelian and non-Hegelian, between world-historical triumphalist and Asian localist-revisionist views, continue. Is Asia to be finally free of Western colonialism, for instance, or will some Eurasian countries lie forever subordinate to colonial powers? (Kimura 2018) Reading these and other works about Eurasian history, one is sobered to consider that Eurasians must often “memory” themselves out of Hegelian History, at least as long as History and its concomitant “Asian Century” discourse continues to dehistoricize (small “h”) Eurasia. Europeans and North Americans often do not face the same kinds of ideological zero-sum choices, because, in their case, the ideology and its presumability are often one. In Eurasia, by contrast, the search for universalism very often does not come with such easily-obtained rewards.

In economics, too, a Western ideological frame has long skewed the investigation of people and commerce in their complexity (see, e.g., Kurimoto 1979, Peters 2023, 984). Marshall Sahlins’ (1930-2021) seminal study *Stone Age Economics*, and the earlier, even more foundational *Great Transformation* by Karl Polanyi (1886-1964), argue, as have many Japanese thinkers, for the impotence of classical economics in understanding human beings and their histories (Sahlins 2017; Polanyi 1944; Komatsu and Kurimoto 1982, 220). Ideologies create their own refutations by forcing humans to re-emphasize the complexity of the world and of the human societies that ideologies attempt to simplify. Given the plentitude of works which run counter to conceptions of *Homo economicus* or its cousin, the even more simplistic “Asian Century,” it is a wonder that there are proposals for “Asian Century” thinking at all.

Central to the narrative of “centuries,” and especially of the “European Century” and “American Century” narratives on which Khanna rests his “Asian Century” framing, is the special pleading on behalf of Hegelian History that suffering in war is acceptable because of the progress to

which war alone can sometimes give birth. Contemporary writer Tim Shorrock's essay on the continuation of the comfort women industry in the service of the southern half of the Korean peninsula's American occupiers, as well as researcher Akemi Johnson's investigation into the base (in both senses of the word) economy perpetuated by Americans in Okinawa, are jarring confrontations with Hegelian necessity (Shorrock 2019 and Johnson 2019). Censorship, too, becomes justified by the prerogatives of the progress-bearing state working on behalf of Hegelian History (Etō 1989; Takahashi 2014; Sekino 2022; Tanaka 2001; Hino 2019; Nishio 2008; Nishio 2010; Nishio 2014a; Nishio 2014b; Arima 2020; Itō 2023; Mitamura 1987). The suffering and rejection on which History feeds in turn nurture the anti-Hegelian worlds which seek to recover history (small "h") from History. People after people, from within the totalizing Hegelian frame, complicate and even reject the notion of a century belonging to a European nation-state (see, e.g., Blackhawk 2023; Sarker 2020; DeLay 2008; Schueller 2019; Chakrabarty 2000; Spivak 1988; Trouillot 1995; Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Hämäläinen 2008; Hämäläinen 2019; Hämäläinen 2022; Stannard 1993). And so, for any "Asian Century" as well.

Asianism Retold

My colleague and research associate Neha Bansal is the founder and leader of a project working at the center of the struggle against Hegelian hegemony in Eurasia. *Asianism Retold*, Bansal's brainchild, has brought together thinkers in Asia to examine what are Asian values and how those values can be reintegrated into Asia to redirect Asian realities along the lines of Asian sensibilities. Bansal is insistent that *Asianism Retold* is not oppositional to the West or to any other cultural or civilizational framing. Instead, *Asianism Retold* sees Asia as a place with a rich diversity of peoples and heritages, and seeks to make the present and future of Asia sites of untrammelled commerce between what Asians themselves think, believe, and expect, and what Asians themselves do in their various worlds. Our research overall indicates that there is not a set of Asian values which take their meaning from not being Western (or any other kind of) values. Asian values are simply a fact of life in many places in Eurasia. They have their significance and they do their human work in Eurasia, without any greater geopolitical framing required. The point of Eurasian values is not to expand them into a century-bestrident monster, but to understand how people in Eurasia understand themselves as part of the values panoply that works in their world. Eurasian values are not abstractions and often defy abstraction, especially of the Hegelian kind. Eurasian values are human, irreducibly complex, and not part of a global circus of spotlighted regions taking control of centuries and bending them to some Historical super-will.

It is in that spirit that I approach the current exercise examining the notion of an Asian century. What I argue for here, and what Bansal and I do in our research under her leadership, is to prioritize Eurasia, to give Eurasia a voice, and not to entrap Eurasia or Eurasians in a predetermined route-ism which always privileges the West by dint of Hegelian presuppositions. Asia can be a method for many things, scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen reminds us, mentioning, among others, Takeuchi Yoshimi's (1910-

1977) “notion of Asia as method as a means of transforming the Japanese subject,” and Mizoguchi Yūzō’s (1932-2010) “attempt to rework Takeuchi’s unfinished project” (Chen 2010, 246). I don’t want to see Asia as a method or a means at all, however, at least not in terms of offering resistance to the West or competing to host centuries the way cities now compete to host the Olympics. I want to see Eurasia as Eurasia, as part of an already-in-touch world that does not need to be, and should not be, dominated by one region or country at the expense of all the others. Superadditions such as ages, centuries, and discourse-warping epistemologies—which are, almost by definition, the products of Western ideological assumptions—obscure, and even threaten, much more than they reveal.

Conclusion

“Asian Century” is a term often used in popular discourse. It is meant, most often, to signal a replacement of the far western Eurasia by some part of eastern Eurasia, such as in terms of military prowess, economic might, or “soft power” dominance. These things themselves are highly colored by far western Eurasian assumptions, but there is more about which to be concerned. Within the notion of an “Asian Century,” or, more broadly, of “centuries” which are to be dominated by this or that part of the world, is a Hegelian assumption—a set of ideological blind spots—about the superiority of the West and the nature of History as overpowering non-Western peoples and places.

In this paper, I have suggested various avenues for interrogating the notion of an “Asian Century,” working from scholarship on race, gender, memory, economics, and small-h history. I have also introduced my and a colleague’s research into Eurasian values as a way to illustrate that Asia does not need to traffic in “centuries” or to compete with other parts of the world, especially the West, and especially on Western terms. “Asian Century” is a highly problematic concept and ought to lead to a deeper consideration of how the past several centuries of violence against non-Western peoples and ideas, including Eurasian peoples and ideas, has formed the (a)historical and ideological bases which support the notion of an “Asian Century” in the first place.

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