

The Asian/Chinese Century from the Chinese Perspective¹

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Front and centre in Australia's contemporary discourse about Asia is no longer the 'Yellow Peril', but the Asian Century. Nowhere is this new Asia discourse more prominent than in the recently released White Paper titled *Australia in the Asian Century*, whose broad themes on getting on to the Asia bandwagon have received rare bipartisan support in Canberra. Yet, in China, one of the main actors in the so-called 'Asian Century', this concept has yet to be widely embraced. While there has been some upbeat Chinese assessment of China's future in the new century, overall Chinese attitude has been characterised by ambivalence, caution and even scepticism about this notion (and its 'Chinese Century' variant). This article examines both Chinese perspectives on the Asian/Chinese Century and their implications for Australia's engagement with Asia and China. It argues that the Chinese ambivalence, conditioned by their historical memory and contemporary awareness of the US-dominated strategic order, needs to be taken more seriously by Australian observers and policy-makers, for such China knowledge could help Australia better reflect on its own hope and anxiety about the future of Asia and its at once promising and uneasy place within the region.

World history travels from east to west; for Europe is the absolute end of history, just as Asia is the beginning. - Georg W. F. Hegel²

Neither political Space nor political Time are natural resources. They are ideologically construed instruments of power. - Johannes Fabian³

Introduction

One does not have to be a regular shopper to notice the ubiquity of consumer goods that are now made in China, from toys to clothes, from

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luggage to LCD screens, from cameras to birthday candles. A bestseller vividly depicted the enormous challenge faced by an American family who once tried to live without 'Made in China'.⁴ Of course, things that are not China-made still exist, but it seems that the easiest place to find them is not in shops or supermarkets, but in the marketplace of political ideas. This is especially true with some popular phrases in relation to China itself: 'Greater China', 'the Beijing Consensus', 'the China Model', 'String of Pearls', 'first island chain', 'A2/AD' (anti-access, area denial), 'the China price' – the list goes on.

I count 'the Asian Century' among this long list of phrases. Though it is the catchphrase of the *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper (thereafter, the White Paper), this term is not an Australian invention, nor is it a recent addition to the international political lexicon. As early as 1985, the US Senate hearings on security and development assistance used the term in the following context: 'leaders of the region began talking about a coming economic leap that would propel them into an "Asian century"'.⁵ The hearings gave no reference as to who those leaders actually were, but according to some commentators, its origin could be traced back to the late Chinese paramount leader Deng Xiaoping. Deng did use a similar term, but it was three years later. During his 1988 meeting with Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, he said that '[i]n recent years people have been saying that the next century will be the century of Asia and the Pacific, as if that were sure to be the case. I disagree with this view.'⁶ Obviously Deng did not lay claim to the authorship of this notion. Explaining his objection to it, Deng reasoned that 'No genuine Asia-Pacific century or Asian century can come until China, India and other neighbouring countries are developed', which seemed to him unlikely any time soon.⁷

A quarter of a century later, however, with China emerging as the world's second largest economy and India the third largest (on a purchasing power parity basis), the Asian Century seems to have well and truly arrived. Looking ahead, the White Paper paints an even more exciting picture of what is to come:

Within only a few years, Asia will not only be the world's largest producer of goods and services, it will also be the world's largest consumer of them. It is already the most populous region in the world. In

the future, it will also be home to the majority of the world's middle class.⁸

If the Asian Century has indeed become 'a defining feature of the 21st century',⁹ it follows that the rest of the world, including Australia, should better engage Asia. But to deepen the engagement, it is imperative that Australia should better appreciate how Asia thinks about itself, its place, and indeed 'its' century. China, which would account for about a quarter of the world's economic output and half of Asia's by 2025,¹⁰ has been and will continue to be a key driver in the rise of Asia. Thus, understanding Chinese perspectives on the Asian Century is critical to our effective engagement with the rising Asian powerhouse. Further, getting to know what the Chinese think about themselves and their place both in the world and in this century is integral to what is meant to be China literate.

Given that China is frequently a reference point in Chinese understanding of the Asian Century, this article will look at how both 'the Asian Century' and 'the Chinese Century' have been received in China. Though by no means two interchangeable concepts, they are closely interlinked in the Chinese discourse. It is true that the White Paper does not mention 'the Chinese Century' (or China's century), but the generous space it gives to China clearly implies that an Asian Century without China would not be the Asian Century Australian policymakers had in mind. Thus, it is only appropriate to bring 'the Chinese Century' concept into this 'Asian Century' analysis.

Few scholars would need to be reminded that there is no such thing as *the* quintessential Chinese perspective on the Asian/Chinese Century. Still fewer would claim to be able to canvas the full spectrum of diverse Chinese perspectives. What is attempted below, therefore, is a quick and sketchy snapshot, which hopefully can nevertheless serve as a starting point for further discussion and dialogue on this subject matter.

In the absence of a quantitative survey on this subject, this essay provides a mostly qualitative first-cut by focusing on articles published in Chinese newspapers, journals, and magazines. In doing so, it leaves out overseas Chinese perspectives or views from Hong Kong, Macau or Taiwan as well as views expressed by other means. For example, online

information has become a valuable source in many respects, but at least on this topic most web-based materials have in fact been drawn on existing print media and publications.

To give an indication of how popular ‘the Asian Century’ and ‘the Chinese Century’ are in the Chinese discourse, in early 2013 I conducted some searches in China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database (CNKI), one of the most comprehensive and authoritative Chinese publication databases. CNKI consists of two main subsets of database: China Core Newspapers Full-text Database and China Academic Journals Full-text Database (which includes news and popular magazines as well as academic journals). Within the newspaper database, my searches of the precise phrases ‘亚洲世纪’ (Asian Century) and ‘中国世纪’ (Chinese Century) as a subject returned surprisingly only 4 and 8 articles respectively. When ‘亚洲世纪’ was searched in full-text, 51 articles emerged, with about 12 of them related to Australia’s Asian Century White Paper. A similar search found 42 articles where the phrase ‘中国世纪’ appears at least twice in each article.¹¹

In the second database, my searches of the two phrases as a subject returned respectively 137 and 339 articles published between 1986 and 2012. Considering that this database covers approximately 9,800 journal and magazine titles, this is not a huge haul. By comparison, a search by the subject “和平发展” or ‘peaceful development’ found about 5,350 articles in the same period. Between 2009 and 2012, only 21 journal/magazine articles were found to be directly about ‘the Asian Century’ (this excludes many articles which simply mention that phrase in passing). In 1997 and 2005, Chinese interest in the ‘Asian Century’ appeared to be at its peak, as respectively 12 and 27 journal/magazine articles on the topic were published, well above the yearly average of 5.7 articles. These spikes, however, are mainly due to Chinese reporting and commentaries on the surge in *Western* interest in Asia, rather than a reflection of greater home-grown interest in this debate. For example, 1995-1996 saw the publication of Jim Rohwer’s *Asia Rising* and John Naisbitt’s *Megatrends Asia*, both of which predicted the coming of the Asian Century.¹² Similarly, in May 2005, coinciding with *Newsweek* magazine’s cover story on the ‘Chinese Century’, Fortune Global Forum was held in Beijing, featuring the theme ‘China and New Asian Century’.

Thus, Chinese interest in this debate is by and large sporadic and reactive in nature.

Still, China's relative silence on this notion is in itself interesting, all the more so given that the country is widely billed to be a central player in the Asian Century. Clearly, in this case silence does not mean acquiescence or quiet acceptance. In fact, reading through the small number of articles that do engage with this concept at some length, one can detect some ambivalent, often sceptical or even critical attitudes towards the 'Asian Century' and 'China Century' claims. In the pages that follow, I will chart those views from both intellectual and official sources, before concluding with some brief observations on the implications for Australia's Asia/China engagement.

The Asian/Chinese Century: Its Supporters and Sceptics

If there is such a thing as national psyche, contemporary Chinese national psyche has been acutely torn between a longing for national renewal and an almost equally strong reluctance to attract international attention to its new-found wealth and power. The first dimension of the national psyche has its root in the national humiliation suffered during its modern encounters with Western imperial powers. The second is a reflection of a traditional Chinese mentality that cautions against 'showing off' one's wealth or talent lest one become the target of envy or fear. Chinese attitudes towards the term 'Greater China', a term which was briefly in vogue in the late 1980s and 1990s, reveal this profound emotive ambivalence. After some initial enthusiasm about the emergence of 'Greater China', China effectively abandoned that notion, as it quickly became apparent that in Western eyes it was more often than not reminiscent of some more sinister analogies such as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere or Greater Germany.¹³ In many ways, Chinese responses to the notions of the Asian/Chinese Century can be understood within a similarly Janus-faced structure of feeling of anticipation and hesitation. Perhaps such an ambivalent structure of feeling is more pronounced in the case of 'the Chinese Century' than 'the Asian Century', but the main purpose of this article is not to systematically compare the two in the Chinese discourse, but rather to

first flesh out the hitherto little-examined Chinese perspectives on this general debate.

On the one hand, some scholars and commentators are confident that the Asian/Chinese Century is not a pipe dream, but an unfolding reality.¹⁴ Justin Yifu Lin, former Chief Economist at the World Bank, is a prominent example of this school of thought. Writing for the BBC, Lin argues that '[w]hether we are on the verge of an "Asian Century" or not, one thing is clear: there has already been a dramatic shift in the geographic centre of the global economy.'¹⁵ Though mindful of the challenges of the contagion from the eurozone, sluggish market demand from advanced economies, as well as China's myriad domestic imbalances, Lin is nevertheless optimistic that China will become the 'leading dragon' in the world economy, accompanied by the emergence of the Chinese currency as a global reserve currency.

While not using the term 'Asian Century' or 'Chinese Century', Liu Mingfu, a professor at China's National Defence University, argues that there will be a 'China era' (中国时代) in the post-American world. By his definition, the 'China era' means not only an era when China becomes the world's largest economy, or when it tops the world in terms of material productive capabilities, but also an era when Chinese culture and spirit become the world's mainstream or dominant culture.¹⁶

The late Chinese Indologist, linguist and writer Ji Xianlin also believed that the twenty-first century will be the century of the East, especially in a cultural sense. He is well known for conveying his view through the popular Chinese saying '三十年河东, 三十年河西' (people east of the river prosper for thirty years, and the next thirty years are the turn of those on the west of the river). Influenced perhaps by a combination of dialectical Marxism, traditional Chinese cyclical view of history and his knowledge on Eastern culture, Ji Xianlin saw the arrival of the 'Asian Century' as a certainty, resulting from both the growing limitations of analytical ways of thinking in Western culture and the need for more holistic ways of thinking as embodied in Chinese and Eastern cultures.¹⁷

In the general public, the idea of a Chinese century seems to have also attracted some followers. A 2009 online survey conducted by Tencent (QQ.com), one of China's largest Internet service providers,

indicates that 49.93 per cent of the 12134 respondents believed that the twenty-first century would certainly be the Chinese Century, while 31 per cent disagreed, with the remaining undecided.¹⁸ Since the survey does not provide data on the general profiles of its respondents, it is difficult to contextualise the survey results. But given that such websites often attract younger, tech-savvy users, one may assume that the results better reflect the views of young Chinese than the broader Chinese populace. Also it is likely that some respondents might come from outside China.

However, despite the popular belief in the 'Asian Century' (or 'China era') in some quarters of Chinese society, overall this idea seems to have not caught on in Chinese intellectual and media circles. In comparison to the enduring and often open obsession with building and sustaining the American Century in the United States, the Chinese interest in the Asian or Chinese Century is lukewarm at best. Renowned economist Wu Jinglian once remarked that in the face of heated international discussion on the East Asia Miracle and Asian Century, the Chinese remained unexcited or indifferent. Few Chinese scholars, he argued, cared to look into the policy sources of the so-called 'Asia Miracle'.¹⁹ Even some of the most vocal nationalistic voices, such as those represented by the book *China Can Say No*, have yet to latch onto the grand notion of the Asian or Chinese Century. For instance, in *China Can Say No*, the authors proclaim that China doesn't want to lead anyone in the world, except minding its own business.²⁰

Instead, the more prevailing Chinese attitude to the alleged Asian/Chinese Century has been caution. For many observers, while the possibility of an Asian Century cannot be ruled out, it is premature to declare how the whole twenty-first century will eventually pan out. Notable for their patience and long memory, the Chinese often hold the view that a man's merits and demerits can be finally appraised only after his death. In an oft-repeated story, when asked by the visiting US President Richard Nixon (or his State Secretary Henry Kissinger according to another version of the story) what he thought was the historic impact of the French Revolution, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai allegedly replied: 'It's too soon to tell.'²¹ While this favourite quote may have been a typical example of 'lost in translation', many Chinese would

agree that the defining feature of the new century is indeed too soon to tell.

Other commentators question the wisdom of the Asian/Chinese Century from a global or humanist perspective. For example, while acknowledging the shift of economic centre of gravity towards the Asia Pacific, Tang Renwu, a professor at Beijing Normal University, argues that in the multipolar, interdependent world of the twenty-first century, the world is unlikely to have only one single economic centre. Both the Asia Pacific and the Atlantic, he argues, will qualify as such centres. Consequently, the twenty-first century will not be an exclusively Asia Pacific or Atlantic Century, but a 'Global Century'.²² Echoing this line of reasoning, Zhu Xiangyuan, a member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, argues that with the multipolarisation of world politics and the globalisation of world economy, what we are witnessing is not a Chinese Century or Asia Pacific Century, but a 'Global Century' or a century for all humanity.²³

Still other sceptics turn to empirical evidence. Despite the great strides made by China and other Asian economies, Asia as a whole is seen as still lagging behind the West on a number of fronts, such as science and technology, modern institutions, management expertise, and the ethos of freedom and openness. Zhu Xiangyuan argues that modernisation is not just about economic modernisation, but also includes the modernisation of democratic political system, social harmony, and national culture and citizen character.²⁴ While Confucianism and Asian values more broadly may have some admirable merits that are relevant to the modern age, they are also seen as discouraging independence, creativity, and challenge to authority, all of which may stifle innovation and future development. Thus, some warn that one should not simply extrapolate the current dynamic development in Asia to an Asian Century. Just as one millennium ago China was at the heyday of economic and scientific development but eventually fell behind, today's economic prosperity in China/Asia does not necessarily mark the beginning of an enduring Asian ascendancy.²⁵

Even at the economic level, although many would disagree with the 'China collapse' argument,²⁶ China's economy is not as robust or as competitive as it appears. At one level, despite the much-taunted

phenomena of 'China Inc.' and 'China goes global', the Chineseness of China's economic dynamism has been called into question. While many Western observers continue to marvel at its economic miracle, many Chinese know too well that 'made in China' is not necessarily made by China, nor does China receive the lion's share of profit.²⁷ At another level, it is widely agreed that economic performance cannot be measured by GDP alone, but also by capacities for innovation, competitiveness, energy/resource efficiency and environment sustainability.²⁸ From this standpoint, China has a long way to catch up with Japan, let alone the United States.²⁹ The now disgraced Chinese politician Bo Xilai once famously said that in order for China to buy one Airbus A380, it would need to sell 800 million shirts.³⁰ The larger point here is that the Chinese Century, if it did come to pass, would not be based on 'Made in China' alone. Rather, it needs to be underpinned by 'Created in China' (中国创造).³¹ Moreover, the current world currency order is still dominated by US dollar. At an international conference on 'Financial Supervision in East Asia' in late 2010, some Chinese scholars maintained that unless this order was reformed to better reflect Asia's financial interest, no matter how big Asian economies had become, the Asian Century would not materialise.³²

Asia's diversity, complexity and unevenness are believed to further complicate the emergence of an Asian Century. It is often noted that Asian countries do not experience uniform economic development, with hundreds of millions of people still living in poverty today.³³ The unevenness is not only visible across countries, but also within them. It was on this account that Deng Xiaoping cast doubt on the imminent arrival of the Asian Century. The economic rise of China and India today may have exceeded Deng's expectations, but the whole of Asia is more than China and India.

Unlike Europe and North America, Asia has no common market, nor is it a coherent entity.³⁴ In fact, as both Western and Chinese scholars have noted, 'Asia' as a seemingly homogeneous geographical/cultural space was a European construct.³⁵ Although China, Japan, and Korea have each signed a free trade agreement with ASEAN, the trilateral free trade agreement negotiations among these three Northeast Asian powers have just begun, which face the competition from the US-led

Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Though the US may not openly admit it, the TPP is in part aimed to consolidate the US-led Pacific Century,³⁶ if not primarily to foil the emergence of a China-led Asian Century.

Strategically, Asia remains a very volatile region. To date, the prediction of an Asian Century has been based largely on Asia's economic performance. Yet, for all its importance, economy is only part of the new century equation. Political power is equally, if not more, vital in shaping the contours of the twenty-first century. The director of National Institute of International Strategy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Li Xiangyang argues that to become a real economic centre in the world, Asia needs to play a more active political role in making global rules and norms, but thus far that is not happening.³⁷ Furthermore, when it comes to security Asia and its adjacent regions have been fraught with some of the world's most intractable hot spots: Iraq, Afghanistan, Middle East conflicts, Iran nuclear stalemate, terrorism, instability in Central Asia, India-Pakistan rivalry, North Korea nuclear crisis, as well as the Taiwan Strait. In recent years, the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and over the Diaoyu (Senkaku in Japanese) islands have further laid bare the fragile nature of Asian security order. As this region faces the most complex and potentially most explosive security challenges, it is doubtful that Asia would be ready for an 'Asian Century'. Many analysts point out that an economically booming Asia does not necessarily mean that its security challenges and flashpoints will easily go away or that Asian values such as collectivism, filial piety, thrift and work ethic will automatically gain universal appeal.³⁸

While most Chinese scholars and commentators doubt the claim of the Asian/Chinese Century on the basis of 'empirical' evidence and perceived internal problems and challenges facing the region, some observers criticise these notions for their 'undesirable' international implications. For instance, senior veteran diplomat Wu Jianmin argues that such expressions remind people of the numerous wars, aggressions and plunders associated with the emergence of the European Century in the nineteenth century and that of the American Century in the last century. In his view, Asia as one of the biggest victims of those wars and

aggressions should not repeat the developmental path trodden by the US and European powers.³⁹

Also, in Chinese culture being the top dog (or in Chinese terms, the top tree) has its risks. As the saying goes, 'taller trees catch more wind', an experience China can already relate to with its sudden elevation to the No. 2 spot in the global pecking order. With the region already becoming 'an object of global envy',⁴⁰ crowning the twenty-first century with the Asian/Chinese Century is likely to draw even more unwanted international attention to China. Seeing the 'China threat' argument as a response to China's rise, some Chinese observers treat the 'Chinese Century' narrative as a variation of the 'China threat' argument. In an interview with *Global Times*, Fudan University professor Wu Xinbo stressed that Western claims of the Chinese Century could easily fuel the fear of China.⁴¹ According to Liu Zhenye, underlying the widespread discourse of the 'Chinese Century' is Western anxiety about the uncertain implications of China's rise for Western (especially US) dominance in the international system.⁴² Jin Canrong and Dong Chunling note that such anxiety and fear has already prompted the US to 'pivot' to the Asia Pacific with a vengeance. As quarrels inhibit cooperation and suspicion erodes trust in the region, they warn that Asia runs the risk of being embroiled in a new round of great power competition, with the 'Asian Century' turning into an internecine 'Asian tragedy'.⁴³

Though a clear minority, other observers go so far as to hint at a 'conspiracy' by the West, particularly the US, to artificially inflate China's power in order to justify their plot of containing China. In a media report, Zhao Xiao wrote that

When the US cried out in alarm the 'Japan threat' in the 1980s, Japan subsequently fell into a decade-long recession; when the world sounded the alarm of the coming of the Asia Pacific era in the 1990s, Asia then mysteriously got bogged down in an unprecedented financial and economic crisis. Today, when people outside China, whether with good will or malicious intention, are cheering the coming of the Chinese Century, the Chinese should be extra cautious about the many traps down the track.⁴⁴

Such a 'conspiracy' theory about 'the Asian/Chinese Century' has only a niche market in the Chinese intelligentsia, but its existence illustrates the depth of the cautious dimension of the Chinese psyche. This explains why few Chinese buy, for example, Martin Jacques' argument in his book *When China Rules the World*, which has been seen as an attempt to '捧杀中国' (kill China with excessive praise).⁴⁵

From the Asian Century to the China Dream? Views from Beijing and Beyond

While the Chinese public and intellectual community may be divided on the 'Asian/Chinese Century' issues, neither term has made its way into the official lexicon of the Chinese leadership. Beijing's longstanding line of argument has been that China is still a large developing country. According to former Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Hu Jintao, this basic national condition remains unchanged. In his 18th Party National Congress report, Hu used the words '世纪' (century) five times, with four of them appearing in the cliché 'in the new stage in the new century'. If it means anything, this phrase seems to denote a period of 'volatile international situation and unprecedentedly fierce competition in comprehensive national strength', rather than an 'Asian/Chinese' century.⁴⁶ Even during his opening ceremony speech at the 2005 Global Fortune Forum on 'China and New Asian Century', Hu did not mention the phrase except in a brief reference to the Forum's theme.⁴⁷

If Deng Xiaoping's advice is still any guide to understanding Chinese politics today, the lack of official endorsement of the Asian/Chinese Century comes as no surprise. Deng's disapproval of the 'Asian Century' was based not only on the long-term challenge of Asia's common development, but also on his political strategies of '韬光养晦' and '决不当头' (keep a low profile and never take the lead).⁴⁸ These strategies, along with '有所作为' (make useful contributions), have continued to guide China's foreign policy making. The Chinese government takes pains to emphasise that China is still at an early stage of building socialism with Chinese characteristics. Realising that with power comes responsibility, it may be a deliberate strategy for China to cling onto its 'developing country' status so that its economic

development would not be unduly constrained by its international responsibility for combating climate change. Similarly, keeping a low international profile enables China to concentrate on its domestic priorities without alarming its neighbours and other great powers. To defuse international concerns about a Chinese hegemon on the horizon, Beijing has long carefully watched its words and deeds lest that they encourage such an impression. For example, as if its 'peaceful rise' strategy were not reassuring enough, Beijing soon changed the term to the colourless and less provocative term 'peaceful development'.⁴⁹

Of course, it may be argued that Beijing's strategy of 'keeping a low profile' only belies its ambition to dominate the twenty-first century when its time comes. For example, its constant reference to 'the great renewal of the Chinese nation' might be just such a telltale sign of China's grand strategy. In Hu's 2012 party congress report, this phrase was mentioned 14 times. Indeed, since Xi Jinping came to power in late 2012, he has crystallised this goal into the catchphrase '中国梦' (the China dream). He predicts that by 2049 when the People's Republic celebrates its 100th anniversary, the Chinese dream of national renewal will come true. However, apart from the vague connotations of building a strong and prosperous China and assuming China's rightful, autonomous place in the family of nations, what the China dream would entail remains unclear. If by this it means that the Middle Kingdom will regain its past glory, then it may well amount to a *de facto* Chinese century. Or at least some may interpret it that way.⁵⁰

As mentioned at the beginning, this ambiguity in the Chinese official stance on China's future reflects the broader national ambivalence about its identity and global role.⁵¹ Conditioned by both vivid memory of its century of humiliation and acute awareness of a less than hospitable international strategic environment, this ambivalence will not fade away or be easily resolved. The Chinese are conscious that the largest obstacles to their national renewal, apart from myriad domestic problems, come from the very perception that China's rise will usher in a Chinese (or Asian) Century. Yet ironically, China's continued ambiguity on its trajectory and strategic objective in turn has tended to aggravate the nagging uncertainty about China felt in the international community.

In this context, I argue that the concern about whether China or Asia will 'own' and dominate the new century reflects not so much the ambition and grand design of China or other Asian countries. Rather, it tells us more about the Western/American anxiety that their century might come to an abrupt end as well as about their desire and hope to prolong their century as far into the future as possible. There is no contradiction between the constant talk about the arrival of the Asian/Chinese Century and the insistence that the American Century should continue. Rather, they are the two sides of the same coin.

Here, at the risk of oversimplification, underlying the international debate on the Asian/Chinese Century is the difference – when it comes to understanding time and history – between Chinese and Asian countries on the one hand, and the US and Western countries on the other. Claiming to be the children of the Enlightenment and modernity, the West in general and the US in particular have tended to view history in a linear, progressive fashion. In this sense, it is easy to understand why there has been 'a continuity of futurism in mainstream American international theory.'⁵² This, together with the Judeo-Christian tradition of linking time with a chosen people (or region),⁵³ explains the Western fascination with questions such as whether we have reached the end of History and whether the twenty-first century is an Asian, Pacific, or American one. From the 'White Man's Burden' to the US's 'manifest destiny', the West and the US have customarily claimed to be the chosen people/country to lead the world 'because no one else can'.⁵⁴ It is in this context that the earliest sign that someone else (either China or Asia in general) might be able to take over that role seems deeply unsettling: it flies in the face of how the West has come to define itself. If history is linear, then the Asian Century could well mean that the era of the West/US would be lost forever.

As noted above, for the most part, China has been careful to avoid touching that raw nerve in the American psyche. This caution has less to do with its false modesty or art of deception than to do with its mostly sincere sense of inadequacy and its cyclical view of time and history.⁵⁵ If time is cyclical in nature, then the Asian/Chinese Century, even if it has dawned, might prove to be temporary. The quick shift in international opinion about the merits of the Asian model after the Asian financial

crisis seems to lend credence to such prudence: Western claims of the 'Asian Century' could come and go within a matter of years, if not months. And many would remember that not long before the current 'Asian Century' fever, Asians (along with Africans) had been dubbed 'people without history'.⁵⁶

To be sure, some Chinese have warmed to a linear view of history, thanks to the influence of Marxism and modernity in general. One of the most popular concepts in the Chinese IR discourse, for example, is '时代' (era).⁵⁷ But they tend to characterise time in broad thematic terms, rather than tying it with a spatial or national ribbon. For instance, following Deng Xiaoping, most in China still regard this century as the era of 'peace and development', which succeeded the era of war (Mao Zedong) and that of imperialism and revolution (Lenin and Stalin). Insofar as they continue to see this era as development, this is a tacit recognition that the twenty-first century is still the continuation of an era started and dominated by the West, with China still playing catch-up in the modernist pursuit of economic development.

Sino-Australian Relations in the 'Asian Century'

Given the broad Chinese scepticism about the claim of the Asian Century, Chinese reactions to Australia's Asian Century blueprint have thus far focused less on the merits of the Asian Century per se, and more on what this blueprint means for Australia's policy towards Asia in general and China in particular. Most Chinese commentators see the release of the White Paper as a positive step in Australia's long and sometimes troubled engagement with Asia's rise.⁵⁸ Quite a few newspaper opinion pieces use the word '拥抱' (embrace) to describe Australia's latest Asia overture.⁵⁹ One article approvingly notes that in comparison with the 'China threat' theme in Canberra's 2009 Defence White Paper, the 2012 White Paper provides an explicitly positive assessment of China's development and perceives China's military growth as 'a natural, legitimate outcome of its growing economy and broadening interests'.⁶⁰

At the same time, many also point out that Australia's embrace of Asia has been driven mainly by economic interests, rather than genuine

identification with Asia in political and cultural terms (the White Paper's emphasis on learning Asian languages and cultures notwithstanding).⁶¹ Thus, questions remain about Australia's sincerity in its commitment to the Asian Century and the mindset upon which its Asia literacy effort is based. Both the recently strengthened Australia-US alliance and Australia's suspicion of Chinese investment have been singled out as evidence that at the back of its mind Australia seems to continue to treat Asia (and in particular China) as 'the Other'.⁶²

What should Australia make of these Chinese perspectives on the Asian Century? Insofar as Canberra's 'Asian Century' rhetoric has a primarily domestic audience in mind, it is tempting to suggest that Australia need not take seriously what China thinks about the Asian Century. As one government adviser involved in the drafting of the White Paper noted, the White Paper was mainly about getting 'our own house in order'.⁶³ Even so, it would be unwise to ignore Chinese views on an issue putatively central to Australia's future prosperity and security, if not its identity. Australia's enthusiasm about the Asian/Chinese Century and the US's resolve to maintain its preponderance in Asia illustrate precisely the dual, complex connotations of the Asian/Chinese Century the Chinese feel deeply ambivalent about.

To many Chinese, an inevitable question is how the Asian/Chinese Century, if it were true, could co-exist with the American Century. Indeed for Australia, such a pointed question is no longer just a hypothetical scenario, but a reality. In recent years, Australia has debated about this paramount strategic challenge,⁶⁴ but such a debate is often too self-centred, with little attention paid to how the Chinese (and Asian people in general) perceive the alleged Asian/Chinese Century and the alleged 'power shift'. But pay attention we must, as the future of Asia will ultimately be jointly constructed by Asian countries as well as influenced by Western perceptions and policies. While we need not necessarily replace our optimism about the Asian Century with pessimism, or substitute our new sense of urgency with usual smugness and complacency simply because the Chinese feel ambivalent about it, at least the ways in which China thinks about the 'Asian/Chinese Century' could help put into perspective our teleological hope and (perhaps to a

lesser extent) fear about the future of our geography. In any case, genuine Asia/China literacy, one of the key capacities identified by the White Paper as essential to Australia's prosperity in the 'Asian Century', is not to be gained through old-fashioned, Orientalist representations of Asia as 'threat' and/or 'opportunity'. Rather, it has to emerge out of a sensitive, humble, and intersubjective process of engagement, dialogue and self-reflection. If 'the Asian Century' rhetoric can in some way help speed up this process, it would at least have served a very useful purpose.

NOTES

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² Georg W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 197.

³ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 144.

⁴ Sara Bongiorni, *A Year Without "Made in China": One Family's True Life Adventure in the Global Economy*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2007.

⁵ *Security and Development Assistance: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, United States Senate, Ninety-ninth Congress, First Session, 1985, volume 4, p. 541.

⁶ *Deng Xiaoping Wenxuan* (Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping), Vol. 3, Beijing: Renmin chubanshe (People's Publishing House), 1993, p. 281.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The Australian Government, *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, p. 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 52.

¹¹ If we count all articles which contain ‘中国世纪’ at least once, the number is higher, but then many such articles either mention ‘the Chinese Century’ in passing, or upon a closer look they have nothing to do with this topic at all. This is because such basic search cannot distinguish this phrase from the word clusters where the two words ‘中国’ and ‘世纪’ happen to go together in Chinese writing but mean something else.

¹² In *Megatrends Asia*, Naisbitt predicted that ‘the Year of the Dragon [2000] will usher in the Dragon Century’, which briefly sparked some Chinese discussion on which region would lead the twenty-first century. See John Naisbitt, *Megatrends Asia: The Eight Asian Megatrends That Are Changing the World*, New York: Touchstone, 1997, p. 17.

¹³ See Herbert Yee and Zhu Feng, “Chinese Perspectives of the China Threat,” in Herbert Yee and Ian Storey eds., *The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002, p. 24; William A. Callahan, *Contingent States: Greater China and Transnational Relations*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. 19; and Harry Harding, ‘The Concept of “Greater China”: Themes, Variations and Reservations.’ In David Shambaugh, *Greater China: The Next Superpower?* Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 31.

¹⁴ Some commentators even declared in 1995 that the Asian Century had arrived ahead of time. See Kang Ning, ‘Caifu jiaoliang: Yazhou shiji tiqian daolai’ (Competing for Wealth: The Early Arrival of the Asian Century), *Kaifaqu daokan* (Developing Zone Herald), no. 4, 1995, pp. 4-11.

¹⁵ Justin Yifu Lin, ‘Viewpoint: China, the “Leading Dragon” of the World Economy,’ BBC, 24 November 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-15861161>; see also Xin Hua, ‘21 shiji shi Zhongguo shiji ma?’ (Is the 21st Century a Chinese Century?), *Jiangsu jingji bao* (Jiangsu Economic Daily), 3 November 2000, p. 4.

¹⁶ Liu Mingfu, *Zhongguo Meng: Hou Meiguo shidai de daguo siwei yu zhanlue dingwei* (The China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era), Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubangongsi (China Friendship Publishing Company), 2010, p. 92.

¹⁷ Ji Xianlin, *Sanshinian hedong, sanshinian hexi*, Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 2007, pp. 30-33.

¹⁸ See http://vote.qq.com/cgi-bin/survey_project_stat?pjId=5147&rq=yes.

¹⁹ Wu Jinglian, “‘Dongya qiji’ de zhengce genyuan he Kelugeman jiaoshou de tiaozhan’ (The Policy Origins of ‘East Asia Miracle’ and Professor Krugman’s Challenge), *Gaige* (Reform), no. 2, 1995, p. 6.

²⁰ Song Qiang et al., *Zhongguo keyi shuo bu: Lengzhan hou shidai de zhengzhi yu qinggan jueze* (China Can Say No: Political and Sentimental Choices During the Post-Cold War Era), Beijing: Zhonghua Gongshang Lianhe Chubanshe, 1996, back cover.

²¹ Richard McGregor, ‘Zhou’s Cryptic Caution Lost in Translation’, *Financial Times*, 10 June 2011, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/74916db6-938d-11e0-922e-00144feab49a.html#axzz2MY650Cv5>

²² Tang Renwu, ‘Yatai shiji shifou zhen de lailin’ (Has the Asia Pacific Century Well and Truly Arrived), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (World Economy and Politics), no. 10, 2000, pp. 42-46.

²³ Zhu Xiangyuan, ‘Xiejue “Zhongguo shiji”: 21 shiji yingdang shi “quanqiu shiji”’ (Say No to the ‘Chinese Century’: The 21st Century Should Be a ‘Global Century’), *Jingjijie* (The Economic Circle), no. 3, 2007.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁵ Yan Shifan, ‘Yazhou shiji de mengxiang’ (The Asian Century Dream), *Kaifang Daobao* (Opening Herald), no. 4, 2000, pp. 19-20.

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²⁹ Zhu Xiangyuan, ‘Xiejue “Zhongguo shiji”’, p. 4.

³⁰ ‘Bo: 800 Million Shirts for One Airbus A380’, *China Daily*, 5 May 2005, p. 1.

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⁵⁴ Charles Krauthammer, 'Universal Dominion,' in Owen Harries ed., *America's Purpose: New Visions of U.S. Foreign Policy*, San Francisco: ICS Press, 1991, pp. 9, 13. Of course, Europe and the United States do not always share the same vision about the new century. In the 1990s, the 'Pacific Century' mantra popular in the US caused much angst among European leaders that Europe might be left as the odd man out. See David Scott, 'The 21st Century As Whose Century?' *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 13 (2), 2008, p. 99.

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