

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

Welcome to the Asian Century

Author

Michael Wesley

Published

2013

Journal Title

Griffith Asia Quarterly

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/340297>

Link to published version

<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/tep/141524>

Commentary

Welcome to the 'Asian Century'

Michael Wesley

Australian National University

Welcome to the Asian Century. It's finally here. We've waited so long. Our first century was the British Century. We did pretty well out of that. We got us the last remaining continent on earth. Sure someone else already owned it but that was a minor detail. After all, we were British, and, according to Cecil Rhodes, being born British was to have won first prize in the lottery of life. Soon we were the wealthiest people on earth by head of population. We imported those institutions and laws the British had developed over centuries. And those sports the British spread around the world? We were the best at those too. Except for soccer. And rugby union.

Our second century, give or take 50 years, was the American century. We did pretty well out of that too. We came to realize that this was a world of boundless possibilities if you looked and spoke and thought like us.

In the American century, life just got better and better. No need to worry or struggle. We were protected by the most powerful nation in history with the most powerful weapons ever built.

Australia had a role, a significant role, on the regional and global stages. We were no longer the wealthiest people on earth, but we weren't doing too badly thanks very much. Cars, whitegoods, televisions, Hollywood movies, beach holidays, rock and roll...

And now, here we are in our third century – the Asian Century. We've been awaiting its arrival for some time with some trepidation. But fear not. The Asian Century looks like being the best of the lot.

First of all, this isn't such a new thing. The world's been here before. Apparently 500 years ago, when Asia was the centre of the world – and had been for millennia. Secondly, the Asian Century means that the focus of dynamism and action will be coming our way. Asia is

becoming the global epicenter of production, consumption, innovation, and business strategy.

And if all that dynamism is a bit unsettling, be not troubled. Because Asia is where the bulk of the world's middle classes will live. One vast continent of clipped lawns, golf clubs and white picket fences – what could be more reassuring than that?

All of this is one giant business opportunity for Australia. Asia's urbanization? – Dial up a continuing minerals boom. Asia's demand for better food? – add a side order of an agribusiness boom. How about the demand for services? – we're well placed there too. The Asian hunger for luxury goods and jewelery? – how about a new gold rush? Educating Asia's middle classes? – that's where schools and universities cash in. Asia's investment in technology and innovation? – we can catch that train too.

According to this scenario, the Asian century will be like the British and American centuries, only better. All we have to do is make sure we learn a few more Asian languages. At least, this is what the Asian Century will look like according to the Gillard government's part-investment pamphlet, part-pep talk White Paper, *Australia in the Asian Century*.

Now, excuse me if I sound a bit churlish, but I'm less than satisfied with this version of what the Asian Century will be. To me there's not much that's Asian about this Asian Century other than the geographic location. It's as if the Asian Century will be a continuation of the British and the American Centuries, only bigger and closer to us. I think we need to set the bar a bit higher than the White Paper does if we really are to call the 21st Century an 'Asian Century'.

The naming of centuries after countries or regions goes back some way, but its modern usage was firmly established by Henry Luce's essay proclaiming an American Century in *Life* magazine on 17 February 1941.

Luce's "American Century" must be close to the most influential essay of the 20th century. Written while the United States watched anxiously on the sidelines of the Second World War - torn between fear of Nazism and the prospect of becoming embroiled in Europe's troubles again - it was a passionate appeal for America to assume the role of evangelical internationalism.

Arguably, "The American Century" provided the clarion call for the United States as it entered the Second World War and then as it waged the Cold War. The essay began with Luce admonishing Americans: their country had become the dominant power, industrially, financially, militarily and culturally.

The century in which America had arrived at this position, the twentieth century, offered unheard of promise for the wellbeing of humankind. The twentieth century had for the first time united humanity into a single world. But no century in living memory had fallen so brutally, tragically short of its boundless promise for humankind.

The cause, thundered Luce, lay in the soul of America. "The fundamental trouble with America has been, and is," he wrote, "that whereas their nation became in the 20th Century the most powerful and the most vital nation in the world, nevertheless Americans were unable to accommodate themselves spiritually and practically to that fact."

For Luce, the salvation of the world and the salvation of America lay in the same direction. The United States must build an American Century. To build the American Century, argued Luce in 1941, the United States must reshape the world according to America's own gifts and attributes. "America cannot be responsible for the good behavior of the entire world," he argued, "But America is responsible, to herself as well as to history, for the world environment in which she lives". "Nothing can so vitally affect America's environment as America's own influence upon it...and therefore if America's environment is unfavorable to the growth of American life, then America has nobody to blame so deeply as she must blame herself."

Luce listed four ways in which America needed to reshape the century in which it found itself so dominant. It must build free trade and economic freedom in the world. It must foster education, knowledge and technical progress around the world. It must promote global nutrition and prosperity for all peoples. And it must spread and inculcate America's most cherished values – freedom, equality of opportunity, self-reliance, independence and the spirit of cooperation – among all humans.

The American Century represented not a claim to dominion over territory but a call for dominion over time – this empire would make history in its own image. It was a call with an electrifying effect on the mind of America and the world. Forty-eight years later, at the end of the Cold War, in another contender for the century's most influential essay, Francis Fukuyama rather anxiously proclaimed the end of history, with America and its ideals the winner.

Of course, history did not end, but it's hard to dispute the claim that Luce's vision of America's internationalist crusade has been the most profound force that has shaped the world in which we now live.

Luce's vision saw America as taking the three great revolutions of modernity – the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution – out of the Atlantic world and spreading them to the rest of humanity. For Luce, for the twentieth century to be an American Century, it required more than just for the United States to be the biggest and most dynamic producer, consumer, innovator, educator and middle class incubator. It required America to act in the world, to proclaim a vision to reshape the world in its own image.

And therefore if the twenty-first century is to be the Asian Century, it must begin and end with a vision among the rising powers of Asia for a revolutionary re-shaping of the world in their own image.

Now this vision of the Asian Century is rather less reassuring than that contained in the *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper. Because at this stage it's impossible to tell what animating values or vision drives Asia's rising powers. We don't know what China intends to do with all of this power and wealth it's amassing. Or what India intends to do with its power and wealth. Or for that matter, what Indonesia's intentions are.

But that's not to say that this will last indefinitely – that Asia's rising powers will remain content to mind their knitting and play by the existing rules and just get richer and richer and stronger and stronger. In many ways, China and India today resemble the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century, the time between the Civil War and the Spanish-American War when America surged to global economic and financial predominance. The same surging growth fuelled by seemingly endless population resources, unchecked by chaotic, venal,

and uninspiring politics. The same conquest of vast hinterlands by equal parts engineering and entrepreneurialism and driven by colourful and odious robber-barons stealing the commanding heights of the economy.

If history is any guide, China and India will soon begin to construct a moral narrative of their rise. All great powers in the past have needed to find a sense of their exceptionalism that will tie them together and justify the choices they have made. By its very nature, a sense of exceptionalism separates a rising power from those societies around it. By its very nature, a sense of exceptionalism looks outside the borders of the rising state and finds others wanting.

There are two possible responses to this: either to withdraw and shut out the defiling influences from outside; or to go into the world and seek to reshape it in one's own image and interests.

Almost inevitably, it is the second response that wins out, as the outside world can never be completely shut out. And here's the rub – if the rest of the world shares the rising power's sense of its exceptionalism, it becomes a confirming relationship that helps harden the rising power's leadership role.

But if the rest of the world doesn't share the rising power's sense of its exceptionalism, the world has on its hands an increasingly frustrated and resentful great power. America was lucky in that from its founding, peoples on both sides of the Atlantic believed it embodied a New World that would transcend and redeem the Old World.

Against this background, the idea of an American Century fell on fertile soil, and Luce's essay was as eagerly read outside America as inside. We know already that China and India each sees itself as exceptional, and the world as in need of redemption.

China, the Chinese Communist Party's thinkers tell us, will be a different sort of great power. It has been there before; it has nothing to prove; it has no inherently expansionist drives to work through. Its long, unbroken history as a civilization is testament to its superiority and its self-sufficiency. It has been the victim of power politics – but its return to global dominance will see the eradication of power politics. Just as in the past when China's civilization brought peace to all under heaven, so

modern China will build a peaceful, harmonious, and mutually beneficial world.

India tends to see the world in no less moral terms than China. India defeated and threw out the greatest Empire to rule the earth not through violence but through a summoning of its original principles of non-violence. It refused to play sides in the Cold War; it refused the material blandishments of the American century; and now it is ploughing its own path towards development and modernity.

To those in America and Australia who ardently hope that Asia's rising powers will become "responsible stakeholders" and play by the rules that have already been set, these early signs of exceptionalism should give you pause.

But wait a minute – these are a couple of pretty benign exceptionalisms aren't they? It's all a bit zen, but it's better than visions we've seen great powers spout before, such as a global racial hierarchy or a world proletarian dictatorship. A century dominated by a couple of great powers who reject power politics – sounds like a pretty good Asian century, doesn't it?

Not so fast. Because the past shows us that what great powers assume is good for all humanity is especially good for themselves. Because the past shows us that great powers always appear more virtuous to themselves than they do to others. With China and India at the moment, all we can see is their stirrings of exceptionalism – we just don't know the detail. And the devil will be well and truly in the detail. What will Asia's giants' versions be of Luce's four tasks for America? We don't know. But what we do know is that just as Henry Luce believed that what is good for the world is good for America, so Asia's giants will believe that what is good for them is good for the world.

The lessons – moral and practical – that China and India derive from their own rise will inform their visions for the world around them. And making it even more complicated is that there will no longer be one society, with one sense of exceptionalism, shaping the world.

The Asian Century will see two exceptionalisms right next to each other, and a third – American – exceptionalism not far away. The one thing we can be fairly certain of is that the Asian Century – when it

arrives – will not be just a turbo-charged and transplanted version of the American Century.

Arguably the Asian Century hasn't arrived yet. But it's coming. Its arrival won't be determined by a certain GDP size or middle class consumption rate or even proportion of tertiary-educated Asians. Its arrival will be determined by the elaboration and promulgation of exceptionalist ideas within Asia's giants.

Many of the attributes of the American Century that Australia finds so congenial such as free trade, open oceans, free enterprise, open research and inquiry, presumptions of the rule of law, and human rights and equality – may become contested in the Asian Century. The question is, how will Australia respond? A range of options are presented by reflecting on the way that different non-western societies responded to the arrival of the American Century during the 20th century.

One option might be called the Turkey option: the ethos of the new order is imposed by powerful elites on an unaccepting society. Another might be the Saudi Arabia option: Australia accepts the material benefits of the new order but rejects its values and draws in on itself. A third might be the Singapore option: adopt and adapt the elements of the new order that will make us the most secure and rich. Perhaps there's also a Philippines option: a complete acceptance of the values of the new order but an inability to benefit from it materially.

There are of course other possibilities. However, the point is that if an Asian Century does arrive in the coming decades, it will present a much more complex and society-redefining challenge than the simple enrichment opportunity sketched by *Australia in the Asian Century*. How we respond will not be a simple or painless choice, but a complex, contested set of agonizing choices. Moreover to make these choices well and wisely, Australia will have to become much better at conceiving, discussing and debating ideas than it has even been.

The challenges for Australia of an Asian Century will be challenges of ideas and values. That's where our universities must step up and play a more central role than they've played in the past. Their challenge is not just to understand what's happening around Australia

Commentary

and how Australia should respond but also to change Australia into a society that delights in new ideas and the contests among them.