

ASIANIZATION OF ASIA: ASIA'S INTEGRATIVE ASCENDANCE THROUGH A EUROPEAN APERTURE

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1. Introduction

In neither Westerners' hegemonic anxiousness about the rise of Asia nor Asians' enthusiasm about individual national successes is systematically comprehended the critical political economic, social, and even civilizational trend in the new century – namely, the 'Asianization' of (modern) Asia. This is a trend much *comparable to the Europeanization of (modern) Europe* in earlier centuries, but has required the disembedding of Asian nations from the EuroAmerica-dictated order of bilateral dependencies and controls and their (re)embedding into the neoliberal global system of capitalist political economy whose parameters are still dominated by EuroAmerica. Asia *is* rising while it is being simultaneously integrated or even (re)constructed internally. The internal integration of Asian nations and peoples – most conspicuously in economic terms, but gradually in social, cultural, and demographic terms as well – has enabled them to find and utilize each other as unexplored resources for sustained economic, social, and cultural advancement. In essence, however, a neoliberal capitalist Asia is on the rise, so that its economic ascendancy has been accompanied by diverse and complex tendencies toward transnational socioeconomic exploitation, cultural conflict, human rights abuse, environmental destruction, etc. There is a pressing need to urgently revamp sociology (and the other social sciences) in order to deal with the various post-national/supranational processes, structures, and actions in Asia-as-a-society adequately. A sociology of Asia is as much necessitated as a sociology of Europe (Roche 2010), implying a great scientific potential for interregional collaboration.

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2. Dimensions of the Asianization of Asia

The so-called ‘rise of Asia’ trend involves not only political economic empowerment of (some) Asian nations in the world order, but also, more critically, fundamental qualitative changes in the way Asia is internally associated and (re)constructed among vastly diverse groups of peoples, nations, cultures, and political economies in the region. Asia’s refuted existence as an arbitrary geo-administrative category for the convenience of Western epistemology and hegemony is increasingly replaced or complemented by the dramatic intensification of intra-Asian interactions and flows in industrial, financial, demographic, sociopolitical, cultural, and ecological spheres.

2.1. The formation of a great Asian labor market

Recent Asian economic development is mainly the outcome of a regionally reframed process of what W. Arthur Lewis called ‘industrialization with unlimited supplies of labor’. The uniqueness of this process is that capital mostly migrates (transnationally) to meet with new sources of labor, whereas some nations have cautiously allowed inflows of foreign labor into selected industrial and tertiary sectors. The combined outcome of these trends is an effective formation of a trans-Asian labor market, under which industrial employment expands rapidly in China and other populous but poor societies at the cost of massive structural disenfranchisement of workers in already industrialized Asian societies.

2.2. Regional demographic imbalances and integrated social reproduction

Asia consists of vastly different national demographic regimes in terms of fertility, population density, regional (rural/urban) distribution, as well as sheer population size. As industrialized East Asian nations (such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong) have confronted fundamental crises in social reproduction of family, population, and labor – namely, ‘lowest-low’ fertility, forced bachelorhood, etc. – they have devised various measures for flexibly accommodating social reproduction labor from other Asian nations. Such measures include ‘mail-order’ brides (in Taiwan and South Korea), home care workers (in Taiwan and Japan), housemaids (in Singapore and Hong Kong), and so forth.

2.3. Educational integration of Asia

Asians have accumulated successful experience in using public education (mainly based upon Western curricula) for condensed institutional modernization and economic development in catching up with the West. The resulting educational fervor has recently expanded into a massive arrival of Asian students to other Asian countries, mostly in proportion to the intensity of socioeconomic interactions between the sending and the receiving countries.

2.4. 'Pop culture Asia'

In a transnational Chinese popular cultural zone dubbed by Chua Beng Huat 'Pop Culture China', Chinese and other popular cultures are integratively produced, (re)processed, and/or consumed by Chinese peoples in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and mainland China. In effect, as Asia-produced pop cultures (in particular, the so-called 'Korean wave') have gradually replaced Western ones in the main regional markets of popular cultures, Asia has become what may be duly called 'Pop Culture Asia'.

2.5. Asia as risk community

Massive industrialization across Asia has produced various environmental, ecological, and biological hazards whose unprecedented transnational effects have made Asian nations and peoples experience and realize a common fate as an interlinked 'risk' entity. For instance, Koreans, suffering severe transborder sand storms from China, have planted China as earnestly as Chinese themselves to slow down the desertification of China. The intensifying issue of polluting, abusing, and/or blocking transnational rivers in various parts of Asia is another example. Japan's nuclear plant meltdown in Fukushima is still another example (although it is as much a global concern as a regional one).

2.6. Trans-Asian social movements, Asia as civil society

The increasing awareness of Asian citizens that the everyday realities of grassroots life in all corners of Asia are critically affected by transnational corporate, financial, sociocultural, and environmental influences from other Asian countries has been duly accompanied by various local social initiatives and international/transnational social networks for pursuing regionally defined justice. Particularly noticeable areas for such Asianized

cosmopolitan citizenship include migrant rights, peasant rights, women's rights, workers' rights, environmental protection, and safety, etc.

2.7. The rise of Asian bourgeoisie

Major industrial firms and conglomerates in developed Asian nations now serve practically as regional bourgeoisie as they aggressively invest and operate in other nations endowed with additional markets, labor forces, and/or resources. To this rank of regional bourgeoisie also belong some Asian states with huge amounts of sovereign financial assets (and Western financial capital that has Asianized itself through diverse portfolio schemes).

2.8. Compatriotic Asianization

Asia includes some of the world's most diasporic nations – namely, Chinese, Indians, and Koreans, who have existed as trans-Asian socio-cultural entities through diaspora. Recently, conscious efforts have been made, particularly by China and South Korea, to utilize overseas compatriots as a strategic platform for economic and other globalization. Overseas Chinese and their respective states (i.e., Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) have served as crucial partners for post-Mao Chinese industrialization, whereas South Korea's multinational industries have utilized overseas Koreans as essential middlemen for expanding their production bases and commodity markets across Asia.

3. The European aperture

The integrative rise of Asia is far from a unique historical experience. The ascendance of Europe against the then-dominant Islamic and Chinese forces since the sixteenth century was, in fact, a process of constructing Europe internally in military, economic as well as cultural terms. The modern revolutions in industrial, political, and philosophical/ideological spheres, while triggered in particular national contexts, soon became trans-European affairs as they were solidified, expanded, modified, and counteracted by various social and political entities across Europe. Modern Europe's global advances in industrial, financial, cultural, and scientific spheres would not have even been imaginable if respective main actors and resources had been rigidly and permanently confined within national or local borders. While details cannot be provided in this limited space, the above-listed dimensions of Asianization all have had some corresponding phenomena in the European context (e.g., Beck and

Grande 2007). The recent unionization drive, while portrayed misleadingly by the ideology of a strong unified Europe vis-à-vis America and Asia, could not have been conceived without reflecting upon the region's early modern experience of economic, sociocultural, and political Europeanization. In the same vein, Asian peoples, businesses, and governments are increasingly enthusiastic about various means for institutionalizing their mutual relationships – toward the 'Asian Union' in the end?

On the other hand, broadly speaking, Asia before Asianization remained an assemblage of EuroAmerica-segmented political entities in which diverse types of simulative or reactive modernizations were pursued mostly in accordance with each nation's entanglement with EuroAmerican influences. Postcolonial Asia's political initiatives for forming lateral networks for genuine collective liberation were shortly tarnished by particularized national necessities of resisting, collaborating with, or serving the West (or its communist rivals). The post-Cold War order, as instantly reframed through neoliberal economic globalism, has relaxed or diluted the political effect of such EuroAmerican segmentation of Asia and instead facilitated and accelerated socioeconomic exchanges and collaborations among Asian nations themselves.

Paradoxically, Asia's disembedding from EuroAmerican bilateral dominance has been sustained by Asia's (re)embedding into the neoliberal global economic order whose basic parameters are set primarily by Western powers. According to Funabashi (1993: 79):

Asia's 'Asianization' is paradoxically the result of the globalization of its economy and media. As Asian nations phase out the special relationships they have had with former colonial powers and integrate with the global economy, they are starting to see neighboring countries as trading partners, providers of investment opportunities and competitors.

Asia's engagement in neoliberal economic globalism has certainly become more proactive and autonomous – especially since the cross-Atlantic financial crisis of 2008 – but this trend does not suggest in any meaningful sense that Asianized Asia is to triumph over EuroAmerica as a new civilizational or political economic hegemon. Moreover, the dominant interests of the West have become effectively 'financialized', so that their ubiquitous structural presence in Asia in terms of portfolio investment, project financing, and commercial loaning – on top of sole or joint direct industrial investment – often makes it meaningless to differentiate between Asian and EuroAmerican capital. EuroAmerican capital has aggressively financed the (economic) Asianization of Asia, thereby growing into an increasingly Asian entity. The 'Asian century' may belong as much to

EuroAmerica as to Asia at the cost of accentuated inequalities in both regions.

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