

IS THIS THE ASIAN CENTURY?

by Robert Cribb robert.cribb@anu.edu.au, President of the ASAA, ruminating on themes that emerged during the Asian Studies Association of Australia's biennial conference in July 2008.

The economic rise of China, and behind it the looming economic presence of India, raise the prospect of a fundamental change in the balance of global power in the 21st century. With economic power will come, surely, strategic power. The military hegemony of the West, so evident during the last two centuries, is likely to give way to a more complex global order. Perhaps that order will be fragile and vulnerable to the kind of collapse that precipitated the First World War, perhaps it will be resilient, thanks to the systems of economic and technological interdependence which will make another world war as unthinkable as a war between the Australian states.

Much harder to forecast is the cultural and intellectual impact of the rise of Asia. Throughout the era of Western economic and strategic hegemony, there was a significant 'backflow' of Asian culture to the West in many different forms – from curry, to Chinoiserie, to gamelan, to Zen. Cultural historians have shown how easily complex societies recruit and absorb foreign cultural elements without being assimilated to foreign culture. We can expect these processes to continue – the recent East Asian fad for things Korean may spread to the West, or it may give way to some new enthusiasm.

The real question is not whether there will be intensified cultural interaction between Asia and the West. Of course there will be.



Nor is there any doubt that Asia can beat the West at its own games, building better cars and more powerful weapons, devising better software and better pop music, distilling better brandy and better biofuels. The consequence will be more and more Asian faces and institutions in the world's various A-lists and

more and more canny Westerners fluent in Asian languages. But we also know that the West is far from finished as a global force for innovation.

If 'the Asian century' means a global century in which Asia is a full participant, commensurate with its size and energy, then – within the constraints of resource depletion and environmental change – we can certainly expect an Asian century. In other words, the rise of Asia does not need to mean the fall of the West.

But the bigger question is whether Asia's enhanced presence on the global stage will change the world's ways of thinking. The rise of the West generated the new modes of thought about the nature of things and the character of humanity that we call modernity. Western societies themselves were transformed before their expansion transformed the rest of the world. Asian societies responded creatively to the Western challenge, but the most important and creative ideas coming out of Asia – from Gandhism to Maoism to the Grameen Bank – were responses to the global agenda set originally by the West; they were not independent attempts to set new agendas for the future.

A century in which Asia takes charge of the world's thinking agendas? Now that would be an exciting change.

Links:

See also Fareed Zakaria's discussion about the rise of China and India, *The Future of American Power*, *Foreign Affairs*, <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/2008/3.html>