

ALTERNATIVE SCENARII FOR ASIA

FUSION AND INNOVATION OR COPYCAT AND SNAKES AND LADDERS

What will Asia of the future be like? Will the continent continue to be divided, copying the used and discarded cultural and economic models of the West? Will it innovate, creating transformative models of energy, governance and identity or will it slide back into poverty? This essay explores alternative futures for Asia and concludes with suggestions for its transformation, taking stock of the continent's cultural, scientific and spiritual age-old capital and present potential. It advocates a creative synthesis of various Asian civilisations—Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, Hindu, Islamic, et al—to achieve an environmentally balanced, harmonious and peaceful state.

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AN ASIAN FUSION FUTURE

Is a new Asia emerging? For any type of future, growth rates would be important. Even with the European debt crisis, long-term expansion is expected to continue (available at, <http://www.iht.com>) and foreign reserves to increase (over 6 trillion for just East Asia). In addition, changing frames of reference would be equally significant—the rise of India and China (Michael Elliot, “India Awakens”, *Time*, 26 June 2006, pp19–31), Chindia or even Chaiwan. India's gross domestic product (GDP) topped 800 billion in 2006 to become the eighth largest in the world and in 2011 it was poised to hit two trillion (available at, <http://www.bizindia.net>). In

terms of purchasing power parity, India is the fourth largest economy in the world at four trillion. In 1990, bilateral trade between India and China was US\$270 million, by 2011 it was over US\$60 billion (“Chindia: You ain’t seen Nuthin Yet”, available at, <http://www.theage.com.au> and Ananth Krishnan, “India–China Trade Surpasses Target”, available at, <http://www.thehindu.com>). It is not just trade that would be important, but also that the US dollar may not remain the intermediary currency—the Bank of India has already started offering direct settlement between the rupee and the yuan (“Chinese Currency: Bank of India – Real Time Settlement”, available at, <http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com>). With India and China likely to have the first and third largest GDPs by 2050, if not well before (available at, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org>), the cultural, economic and political shape of the world certainly would be different. While economic trajectories are clear, the question remains whether Asia would be transformed as well, creating a unique alternative modernity. Can an Asia that says “yes” to itself, emerge as futurist Susantha Goonatilake imagined (*Towards a Global Science: Mining Civilisational Knowledge*, Bloomington: Indiana University, 1998; “Coming Shifts to Asia: The Indic Possibilities”, available at, <http://www.infinityfoundation.com> and “A Post-European Century: The Asia that can say ‘Yes’ to Itself”, *Futures Bulletin*, vol23, no2, 1997).

A new Fusion Asia—traditional but far flatter than a Confucian (Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim) hierarchy—may be possible. This

Asia would continue to learn from others, but instead of only copying innovations or even creative destructions, it would lead the path forward. Instead of relying on traditional “dirty” energy sources, the continent would explore, invent and invest in newer clean, green and glo-cal technologies. With trillions of dollars of assets at risk from climate change, a great deal would be at stake (Robert J Nicholls, *et al*, *Ranking of the World’s Cities*

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most exposed to Coastal Flooding Today and in the Future, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Environment Working Paper no1, available at, <http://www.rms.com>). However, solving challenges such as global warming and sea level rise would require a foundational change in creativity and culture. Prior to altering energy regimes, mindsets would have to shift.

Hints of this are already visible in South Korea with its heavy investment in the creative industries—connectivity through the eyes of the artist and not just the corporate executive or the appropriate ministry (James Dator and Yongseok Seo, “Korea as the Wave of a Future: The Emerging Dream Society of Icons and Aesthetic

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Experience”, *Journal of Futures Studies*, vol9, no1, 2004). Seoul has understood the direct correlation between creativity, culture and economic growth—called by some commentators the “Gross National Cool” (Douglas McGray, “Japan’s Gross National Cool”, *Foreign Policy*, available at <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca> and Andrew Cornell, “Gross National Cool”, *The*

Australian Financial Review Magazine, December 2006, pp38–45) or the “Dream Society” (Dator and Seo, *ibid*). With South Korea having moved up the ladder to near the top in new patents (“World Intellectual Property Organization corrects South Korea’s Patents Ranking to Third”, available at, <http://english.chosun.com>)—joining Japan and the United States (US)—a new future would be indeed possible. More recently and not surprisingly, China is poised to lead nations in patent filings (David Barboza, “China Poised to lead the World in Patent Filings”, *Economix*, 6 October 2010, available at, <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com>) and recent data suggest that it is already doing so (Angelina Tala, “China leads World in Patent Applications, Slow to Expand Globally”, available at, <http://www.medicaldaily.com>).

In an Asian fusion future, the continent could innovate by using tradition and not be weighed down by history—rather it could be uplifted by the past. Having realised that Europe and the US had few solutions to the global financial crisis,

South Korea and other nations would seek a new future—one that was no longer solely based on “catching up” to the West. Along with green investments and cultural change, education could emerge as a prime factor. Learning, in the sense of capacity building could become a key component in the transformation of Asia. Culture and education (Eleonora Masini and Yogesh Aral (Eds), *The Futures of Asian Cultures*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Bangkok, 1993)—traditional, modern and fusion—could become the new growth engines, joining manufacturing and high-technology. The rediscovery of Asian thought, in all its varieties and in almost every field—biotechnology, information technology, management, mind/body, transpersonal health—could provide renewed confidence. Over five years ago, *Businessweek* (30 October 2006, pp86–91) had extolled the *dharma* dons and their new *karma* capitalism. The *Bhagavad Gita* and its philosophy of doing good and seeking higher consciousness could light the way. Thus, the future of Asia could lie in critically reconstructed traditions.

Feng shui, future generations thinking, Jain paradoxical logic, meditation, *tai chi*, *yoga*, etc, could all be part of the solution to a sustainable and transformed planet. *Yoga* is already a twenty-seven billion dollar industry in the US (available at, <http://www.yogajournal.com>). It has been linked not only to enhanced wellbeing but also to productivity—*yoganomics* (as coined by Abe Heisler available at, abe@abrahamheisler.com). For example in a recent study, magnetic resonance spectroscopic imaging showed that regular *yoga* practitioners exhibited higher levels of the amino acid Gamma Amino Butyric Acid (GABA), which is linked to a reduction in anxiety (Richard Allenyne, “*Yoga* Protects the Brain from Depression”, *The Telegraph*, 20 August 2010, available at, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk>). GABA helps fight-off depression and is essential for a healthy and relaxed mind. Meditation also leads to reductions in health costs. Extensive scientific studies demonstrate that regular meditators experience 87 per cent less heart disease, 55.4 per cent fewer tumours, 50.2 per cent less hospitalisation, 30.6 per cent fewer mental disorders

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and 30.4 per cent fewer infectious diseases (Matthew Bambling, “Mind, Body and Heart”, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, vol12, no2, February 2006, pp52–9). Potential cost savings would be enormous if citizens were willing to meditate on a regular basis. Related to this is the move to complementary medicine taking place throughout the wealthy-developed world. In South Australia, for example over 50 per cent of the population has used alternative medicine (“The Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Australia”, available at, <http://www.docstoc.com>).

Researchers have also found that meditation alters the physical structure of the brain, leading to increased thickness of the parts that deal with attention and processing sensory inputs (Sarah W Lazar, *et al*, “Meditation Experience is Associated with increased Cortical Thickness”, *Neuroreport*, vol16, no17, 28 November 2005, pp1893–7).

Learning, in the sense of capacity building could become a key component in the transformation of Asia. Culture and education could become the new growth engines, joining manufacturing and high-technology. The rediscovery of Asian thought could provide renewed confidence.

Magnetic resonance imaging scans of experienced meditators show increased activity in the temporal parietal juncture, particularly the right hemisphere—the area linked to processing empathy. There also appears to be a direct relationship between meditation and the demonstration of compassion. Research published in the *Public Library of Science One* suggests

that individuals—from children who engage in bullying to adults prone to recurring depression—and society in general could benefit from meditative practices (Antoine Lutz, Julie Brefczynski-Lewis, Tom Johnstone and Richard J Davidson, “Regulation of the Neural Circuitry of Emotion by Compassion Meditation: Effects of Meditative Expertise”, *PLoS ONE*, vol3, no3, 2008 and “Compassion Meditation changes the Brain”, *Science Daily*, available at, <http://www.sciencedaily.com>). In India, meditation has been used successfully in prisons, decreasing recidivism and violence (available at, <http://www.prison.dhamma.org> and “Meditation changed Tihar’s Face: Kiran Bedi”, available at, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>).

Along with inner transformations, external changes would also be important, including advances such as micro-credit. The Bangladeshi Grameen Bank's micro lending programme was a dramatic innovation and yet at its root was a deep understanding of the community, the local village economy and Muhammad Yunus' realisation that the dignity of the poor and their desire for a better material life were essential factors for change. Along with changes in inner health and community economic power, green buildings and cities, could become the norm, enhancing productivity and reducing illness. Health innovations could emerge from using the best in all medical traditions—Ayurvedic, Chinese and Western—with the patient at the centre. This however, may be too optimistic as the road to First World status would be long and arduous. Innovations such as micro-credit could be taken out of the community to become one more contested developmental practice, as in India.

The pole of hierarchy in Asian history (Confucian versus Taoist; Vedic versus Tantric) remains strong. While some Asian nations such as Malaysia and Singapore do realise that mastering alternative energies, biotechnology and digital economies require creativity and an open society, whether they legislate openness remains to be seen. The norm so far has been that when a state leader is challenged—as with the case of Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim—authoritarian executive power results. However, Hong Kong and Singapore have shown that whatever the nature of the system, good governance—fair judicial systems, legitimacy and transparency—creates hope for the future and thus positive investment climates.

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A DIVIDED ASIA FUTURE

The “Asia fusion” scenario however, disowns geopolitics—the history of state power. The alternative scenario—the “great game” of statecraft—would be a “divided Asia” future. In this, conflicts between China and Japan, China and Taiwan, India and Pakistan, the two Koreas, to mention some crucial fault lines would continue, if not expand. China’s strategy to control naval routes in the Asia–Pacific already suggests

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a return to realist politics. Internally, for many states the bureaucracy and military would continue to dominate—using capacities and resources and leaving markets in the wasteland. Red and not green tape would rule—regulations would stifle innovations. The entrepreneurial spirit would dry up or at best move to the West. To keep national coherence the “Other of the West” would be used. Nonetheless, by taking away this “bogeyman”, the likely future would become one of endless

conflicts between many “Asias”. In this future, deeper problems—ethnic and geopolitical fault lines, traumas of the past, etc—would keep the continent from realising its cultural and economic potential. Asia would not lead, nor say “yes” to itself.

The past decade of crises provides testimony to this. The Asian financial crisis, extremist terrorism (*al Qaeda*, organised crime and the state variety), the human immunodeficiency virus, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), the tsunami, etc all point to deep systemic problems. These cannot be solved by greater efficiency, but rather must be addressed by changes in worldviews and through better institutional and regulatory frameworks for resolving conflicts. For example, while surveillance helped arrest the SARS epidemic, the problem of major disease outbreaks was not solved—the Bird Flu and Swine Flu, followed. Farming practices, extensive urban development, certain diets whereby men search for exotic foods to enhance sexual potency—all need to change in Asia. The pathologies of tradition must be transformed—if they cannot be altered through changes in the heart and culture, then regional regulatory practices should be created.

A CONFEDERATION OF ASIA

Another way forward could be not just bilateral cooperation but a move to a Confederation of Asia or an Asian Union. For this, aspects of the European model would be instructive. First, a core group of nations would have to be found, regionalism developed and then as rules (energy and water regimes, regulations and trading standards) began to yield positive results, other states could be invited. If an Asian currency developed—the European experience is a cautionary tale—fiscal discipline would be required. Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur or Singapore could be possible centres of governance. Although this scenario would be difficult if not impossible to achieve, the “divided Asia” scenario leading to endless wars would be far worse. An Asian Union or some similar governance structure could be a way forward for resolving issues such as Kashmir, Taiwan, etc.

ASIA AS SECOND BEST: THE COPYCAT FUTURE

While an Asian Union would resolve the inability of the nation-state to deal with global or regional environmental, financial, health and territorial conflicts—contrary to the “divided Asia” future—Asia needs to free itself of the used and often discarded Western future. If it were unable to do so, then bigger buildings, endless shopping malls, obesity and the attendant problems of congestion, pollution and water shortages (billion dollar problems) would continue. The used future of “Asia as second best or copycat” would continue. With increasing evidence showing that exhaust fumes and the effects of suburbanisation are bad “for your heart, for your breathing and for your immune system generally”, something has to give (Sohail Inayatullah, “City Futures in

Western cities today are looking for ways out, for a return to garden cities or urban villages, while Asian mayors battle for the world’s tallest buildings. Western cities are currently seeking to create “green, healthy, smart cities”, while Asians appear fixated on size or on doing nothing and just witnessing the “slumisation of Asia”.

Transformation: Emerging Issues and Case Studies”, *Futures*, vol 43, 2011, pp654–61). It is essential to remember that Western cities today are looking for ways out, for a return to garden cities or urban villages, while Asian mayors battle for the world’s tallest buildings, from Dubai and Kuala Lumpur to Shanghai and Taipei. Is this Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s *geist* returned as a demon? Western cities are currently seeking to create “green, healthy, smart cities”, while Asians appear fixated on size or on doing nothing and just witnessing the “slumisation of Asia”.

Some in the West are even asking the age-old questions of what spiritual cities would look like and how urban spaces could be linked to green spaces to create a feeling of wellbeing and have even invited the presence of the transcendental (Sohail

In India, the share of deaths from chronic disease is expected to increase from 40 per cent in 1990 to 67 per cent in 2020 and spending on cardiac-related treatments is expected to grow annually by 13 per cent. India already has the largest and fastest-growing diabetic population in the world and the number of sufferers has grown tenfold since 1971.

Inayatullah, “Spirituality and the Future Bottom Line”, *Futures* vol27, no6, 2005, pp573–9). Seoul for example, to “bring back” nature, tore up a large part of a motorway and opened up its main river that had been covered for 50 years. Generally however, rather than sustainability it is endless growth that has captured the Asian imagination, but the cost of that growth would be a population that would get fat and sick. For example, by 2015, the number of obese and overweight adults in India and China would have grown by “44

and 66 per cent respectively. In India, the share of deaths from chronic disease is expected to increase from 40 per cent in 1990 to 67 per cent in 2020 and spending on cardiac-related treatments is expected to grow annually by 13 per cent” (“Fatter, Sicker and less Productive”, available at, <http://www.management-issues.com>). “India (already) has the largest and fastest-growing diabetic population in the world and obesity is believed to be one of the causes. The number of diabetes sufferers in India has grown tenfold since 1971” (Justin Huggler, “Rich Gorge as Poor in India Starve”, *New Zealand Herald*, available at, <http://www.nzherald.co.nz>).

Even worse than obesity for Asia's future would be smoking and tobacco related illnesses. The World Health Organization has estimated that one billion people would die from smoking related illnesses (available at, <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com>)—making it the most effective weapon of mass destruction. Most of these would be Africans, Chinese and Indians. Three-quarters of all Chinese men are smokers and studies predict that one-third of young Chinese men would be killed from smoking related illnesses such as emphysema, liver and stomach cancers and tuberculosis. The system however, does not support change as 10 per cent of the national revenue comes from tobacco related taxes (“China bans Smoking without Penalty”, available at, <http://www.guardian.co.uk>). The cost on the health system in the coming decades would be enormous. Not only would the public system be strained but the Asian family healthcare system would also not have enough young people to care for elders. In China, 66 per cent do not believe that smoking is harmful (available at, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>).

SNAKES AND LADDERS

The problems likely to beset Asia—climate change, feudalism, patriarchy, etc—could lead to a potential fall. The demographic dividend—many economically active adults with fewer young and elderly—would not continue forever and indeed is already ending with the beginnings of an ageing society. The dependency ratio, which had so far been low in China and other parts of Asia has started reversing (“A Tale of Three Islands”, *The Economist*, 22 October 2011, pp30–2). By 2025, three hundred million Chinese would be 65+ and by 2020, instead of the earlier seven, there would be only two workers for every retiree (“Domestic Trends: US, China and Iran”, *Rand*, 2008, available at, <http://macrobusiness.com.au>). By 2029, for the first time in Chinese history, the elderly population would exceed the child population (Chen Wei and

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Lin Jinju, *Future Population Trends in China: 2005-2050*, General Paper noG-191, Centre for Policy Studies, Monash University, September 2009).

Apart from the demographic transition and the perils of smoking, geopolitical fault lines could make the rise of Asia challenging—many Asians however expect this as a metaphor of the future (Sohail Inayatullah, “Futures Visions of Southeast

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Asia: Some Early Warning Signals”, *Futures*, vol27, no6, 1995, pp681–8), as they have been betrayed by leaders in the past. Hard work, along with capital and savings have led to a rise, but since age-old problems such as the environment, feudalism and patriarchy have not be resolved, the snake would be next—the slippery road back to poverty. After all, men would still run things and the male gaze would

dominate. There would be little respect for the environment and the big man would still demand respect—patriarchy plus a lack of sustainability and an inadequate governance system. Beneath all this would be the worldview of *karma* or passive acceptance. The future would be seen as that which an astrologer would foresee and not that which could be created. The fear of disasters and not the imagination of a new future would hold sway. Leaders would use this fear to ensure that innovation did not become epidemic. Asian civil society would remain weak, under threat from the state and religious institutions—as conspiracy prone as national leaders, each mirroring the other’s fears.


STRATEGIES AND NEXT STEPS

For Asia to make the transition to a different future in the next fifty years, major transformations would be required. Major shifts would need to occur to avoid the problems of endless growth, the second-hand future of the West, geopolitical fault lines, a “divided Asia”, a return of poverty and a slippery slide down the snake

after a climb up the ladder. To ensure the path to a fusion transformational future, the following steps could lead in the right direction.

1. Cities should be designed that create communities, are green and soft on the Earth, that recycle at every level—as per the work of Malaysian architect Ken Yeang (*Ecodesign: A Manual for Ecological Design*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2006)—and even as they grow financially, retain equity.
2. There should be a move towards resource taxes to promote sustainability (as argued by Michael Towsey, available at, <http://www.pia.com.au>). This means making the transition to sustainable energy regimes and becoming carbon neutral. Either Asia leads in this area or international agencies and markets force carbon regimes on it. A dynamic maxi-mini wage structure should be developed so that all benefit as Asia rises.
3. Bureaucracies should be transformed from red to green tape—rules that help innovation. Real innovation is not PowerPoint presentations from representatives of ministries of science and technology, nor is knowledge only legitimate when blessed by appropriate ministers (the big men). For this, good governance is required—fairness, the legitimacy of institutions especially an independent judiciary and transparency.
4. At the institutional level, new Asian energy and financial agencies should be created. Current global institutions need greater representation of Asian nations and communities. The United Nations must be transformed, not only the Security Council but the General Assembly as well, with representation from civil society.
5. New forms of governance should be evolved. Crucial elements would include civil liberties and rights (including economic rights), democracy (not just voting but using new technologies to have more inclusiveness in decision-making) and transparency (Sohail Inayatullah, “Alternative Futures of a Challenged Democracy” in Michael Mannermaa, James Dator and Paula Tiihonen (Eds), *Democracy and Futures*, Helsinki: Parliament of Finland, 2006, pp113–27)—essentially move towards a peer-to-peer model of economy and governance (available at, <http://blog.p2pfoundation.net>).
6. Terms of governments and leaders should be fixed—Asian leaders need to know when to retire.

7. There should be a move towards increasing cooperative enterprises of all types. For example academic and food cooperatives as argued by Jake Karlyle (available at, <http://www.pia.com.au>).
8. There should be globalisation but with enhanced local and regional economies to protect local bio and cultural diversities, foods, etc.
9. Consciousness technologies should be integrated in education—meditation and *yoga* for primary and secondary schools, businesses and governments.
10. Wounds of past genocides should be healed—thinking should be of desired futures, not of who was right or wrong and should transcend peace solutions, as in South Africa, as argued by Johan Galtung (available at, <http://www.transcend.org>).
11. There should be reflective learning in organisational culture and in universities—not just efficiency but learning about learning.
12. Free trade zones should be created for consumable commodities and as regionalisation and digital technologies continue to shrink distances, all of Asia should become a free trade zone.
13. A Global-Asian prize for innovation should be instituted that helps create the new paradigm. Related to this would be measurement systems that reflect the paradigm since we measure what we wish to do. Old measurement systems that focus only on economic growth would not do justice to the new fusion paradigm that would integrate gender partnerships, prosperity, respect for nature and spiritual practices.
14. A new gender partnership should be developed in which men and women work together (Riane Eisler, *The Power of Partnership*, Novato, California: New World Library, 2002).

Without this last point, nothing would be possible. If change could move in this direction then an alternative Asia would be possible. The year 2050 (*Asia 2050: Realising the Asian Century*, Asian Development Bank, Metro Manila, 2011) would look wonderful indeed—ecologically, financially, socially and spiritually. Asia would have made the transition. 

This article was the backdrop essay for the joint symposium, “Foundation for the Future” between Kyung Hee University, South Korea and Tamkang University, Taiwan, November 2010.