Asia and the Old World Order

By Thomas DuBois | Published in History Today Volume: 63 Issue: 3 2013

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Some commentators predict that the 21st century will be the 'Asian century', marking a significant shift in power from West to East. If so, it will not be so different from the global order of the 19th century, says Thomas DuBois.

The American wall goes up as the Chinese original goes down', published in Puck, 1882. China opens up to trade, while America uses ethnic workers to curb immigration. Library of Congress

As late as the 1990s the global dominance of western ideals, values and institutions seemed unassailable. The Soviet Union had collapsed and China was in disarray. The California dotcoms were booming. The Asian financial crisis of 1997 looked like the final vindication of the clean and open economic institutions of the West over the back room crony capitalism of the humbled Asian tigers. Protests from political leaders such as Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad in defence of what they called 'Asian values' sounded like sour little grapes in the path of history's steamroller.

How far we have come. Two decades after Francis Fukuyama triumphantly declared 'the end of history' America and Europe faced what to many appears to be a future of waning global influence, especially while the seemingly unstoppable rise of Asia has taken its place as the apocalypse *du jour*. There is little question that Asia will continue to shape the world during the coming century. However, if we are to accept the often-heard formulation that the next century 'belongs' to Asia, we might also do well to understand that in many ways the previous one did as well.

It takes a particular sort of nostalgia to imagine that the current global order, the one that the rise of Asia supposedly threatens to upend, ever belonged to the United States, any more than it did to the British Empire at its height. This is not to say that this one-two punch of Anglo-American power did not have a transformative global influence; it unquestionably did. But that power became global precisely because it creatively adapted to new realities.

The world of empires was remarkably well connected. At its height the British Empire was the largest and most successful trading bloc in history, creating a cycle of commerce that linked six continents not only to Britain itself, but also to each other. European imperialism of the late 19th century helped lay the foundation of the political, financial, scientific and religious institutions that we see as underpinning the world system today. But influence flows both ways and, as western interests took root throughout the world, Europe itself had to change. From the late 19th century the unique challenges and opportunities emanating from Asia played an ever increasing role in transforming the private commerce of Europe into the first truly global order.

In 1894 China and Japan went to war. The conflict grabbed the attention of the world and marked the first time that Europe would become directly involved in a struggle between two sovereign nations so far from its own shores. Regardless of how the European powers felt about either of the two belligerents, they had strong interests in regional stability in Asia, based on open access to China. Too weak to fend off foreign aggression and too large to partition, China could not be allowed to fall under the control of any single power. When victorious Japan sought an exclusive leasehold over China's Liaodong peninsula as part of the 1895 treaty of Shimonoseki, Russia, Germany and France all felt their own interests to be sufficiently threatened to demand that Japan back down. Crisis was averted, but stability never returned. In rapid succession China suffered two more wars: the eight nation suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 and a showdown between Russia and Japan in 1904-05, which was fought largely on Chinese soil.

When the dust cleared, north-east Asia was scarcely recognisable. China had entered the decade a lumbering giant and left it a political nonentity. Russia's designs in the East had been crushed and, although badly bloodied by the war, Japan was now recognised as the region's pre-eminent power. Recognising the new reality, each of the major powers abandoned the pretence of consensus and came forward one by one to make private deals with Tokyo. These 'Asian ententes' recognised Japan's unofficial hegemony over Korea and Manchuria in return for similar concessions elsewhere: Britain in India, France in Indochina, the United States in the Philippines and Russia in Mongolia.

Britain led the chorus of voices pressing Japan to keep China politically and territorially intact. It had entered into an alliance with Japan as early as 1902, as a counterweight to Russian designs on Manchuria, and renewed the alliance after the Japanese victory in order to safeguard the 'preservation of the common interests of all Powers in China by insuring the independence and integrity of the Chinese Empire'. Like the other powers, Britain recognised that a land grab in China would not serve its interests. China's Qing dynasty remained a viable partner in trade and diplomacy and most powers preferred to prop up the government they knew than to risk a lopsided and divisive partition. But of all the powers in China, Britain had the most to lose from a potential collapse of the government.

Britain's strategic interests in China were few and relatively minor: its overwhelming concern was how best to position itself to exploit a changing mix of commercial opportunities. Over the course of the 19th century British interests in East Asia had shifted from Manchester to London, in other words from industrial manufacture to finance. This was a very dramatic change to the situation earlier in the cent-ury, when Britain had gone to war not once but twice in order to force China to open its markets. Britain still had a large export market in Asia: as Japan and India rose as competing industrial producers of textiles, Britain moved in to exploit the new market for factory machinery. The real money, however, was in financial services and credit. As early as the 1870s the house of Jardine, Matheson & Company abandoned the opium trade to concentrate on shipping, insurance and banking. As China's solid finances groaned under the costs of war, with enemies at home and abroad, investors were more than happy to make up the balance by buying Chinese government debt on the London market. Between 1874 and 1895 the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (now HSBC) raised £12 million on its behalf. Between 1896 and 1900 that total increased to £32 million.

The British Foreign Office sought to protect private banking interests in China, but was by no means the handmaiden of the financiers. Just as the great trading houses had once goaded Britain to go to war over the opium trade, policy towards Asia was deeply intertwined with financial interests. Dominance in the area of finance became a key focus of British foreign policy in Asia and one of many interests in which competition from Japan and the United States threatened more than profits. Yet the Foreign Office also pressed the Hong Kong and Shanghai to accommodate competition from inside China and elsewhere in Europe, especially after 1895, when the market for credit began to accelerate. Despite enjoying extraterritorial status, the foreign banks understood the importance of maintaining good relations with the Chinese government.

The 20th-century explosion of inter-Asian commerce expanded the market for British services, entirely separately from direct British commerce. Even without the dip in European trade during the First World War, there was at least as much money to be made in facilitating commerce between Hong Kong and Yokohama, Singapore and Bombay as there was in trading between Britain and the East. Here, as well, China remained the greatest prize of all. Hoping to tap into the heart of this market, foreign investors poured money into Chinese land transport. Exclusive permission to construct railways into the interior, together with a right to develop resources along the line, was written into the treaties that Britain, France, Russia and Japan made with China. Chinese nationalists took to calling these unfavourable agreements 'unequal treaties'. Y. Tak Matsuzaka, the historian of Japan, has another name for it: railway imperialism.

Labour movements

The expansion of trade, both internationally and within Asia, also ushered in an era of unprecedented demographic mobility. With better transportation, safer seas and a global market for labour, people moved more and more freely than ever before. As with the flow of goods, the centre of gravity of migration wobbled between the North Atlantic and the Pacific. The latter represented a far larger movement of people. Between 1846 and 1940 some 55 to 58 million Europeans migrated to the Americas. During those same years roughly 100 million people moved within Asia, with most heading for destinations in Manchuria and the south-east of the continent.

The emergence of Asia into what was now a global labour market was felt throughout the world. Between the 1880s and 1920s burgeoning labour movements in North America, Australia and New Zealand capitalised on fears of the threat from cheap Chinese workers and supported a series of anti-Chinese strikes, tariffs and immigration restrictions. The flow of migrants also required governments to standardise procedures for dealing with each other's citizens. This was not a problem within the context of imperial globalisation: most of the great wave of Indian migration of the 19th century went to Malaya, Kenya and South Africa and thus remained within the confines of British administration. Rather, as the historian of modern China Adam McKeown has so effectively shown, it was the global flow of migrants from East Asia, especially from China, that prompted governments to adopt the modern passport as a standard system.

Something similar could be said for the other part of the now familiar border crossing procedure: quarantine. Within Europe certain ports, particularly those along the Mediterranean, had long-established practices for monitoring incoming ships. But as late as 1850 there was no standard procedure for monitoring the health of people passing across national borders. Nor was there any urgency to establish one; even considering the devastation wrought by typhus and smallpox, Europe had not faced a major pan-continental epidemic for centuries.

Coming of cholera

All of this changed when cholera, which reached the Russian Urals in 1829, spread like wildfire across the Continent. By 1831 the disease had reached Paris and within a year killed 12,733 in that city alone. The extreme virulence and rapid spread of cholera caused panic in medical circles and prompted the French authorities to convene a series of International Sanitary Conferences. The first two, held in 1851 and 1859, aimed to determine the cause of, and potential countermeasures to, the disease and were remarkable primarily for their dithering lack of productivity. In addition to a lack of epidemiological knowledge, divergence of political interest hampered any form of consensus. Delegates from seafaring nations discounted the proposal to quarantine routinely ships arriving in port, not because it was expensive but because they felt it was scientifically unsound. So at least it was claimed. Although Britain was hardly unique in this regard, outside observers were quick to note a ‘surprising concordance between England’s commercial interests and its scientific convictions’.

'Cholera on the Bowsprit', an illustration by F. Fritz Graetz, shows the disease personified by a Turkish immigrant.

The third conference, held in 1866, was substantially more productive. Convened in Istanbul, the conference was prompted by a major outbreak of the disease in Egypt, carried by haji pilgrims on their way to Mecca, who arrived in unprecedented numbers via the newly opened Suez Canal. Scientific politics did not stop entirely: delegates from Persia and the Ottoman Empire vocally opposed the charge that cholera was endemic in their lands, while Britain continued to resist ‘with an almost religious fervour’ the claim that the disease had originated in India. Nevertheless the urgency of the situation carried the day. The Istanbul conference proposed the first of a series of practical containment measures, including the construction of a quarantine facility at the entrance to the Red Sea, which required an unprecedented level of co-operation among the European powers.

Although this new partnership within Europe was prompted by fears of disease spreading from Asia, it was the next generation's creation of an epidemic prevention infrastructure within Asia that represented a real globalisation of public health. Two major changes made this possible: the Pasteurian revolution transformed scientific understanding about the origin and prevention of disease, while the expansion of inter-Asian trade and migration gave everyone a stake in tackling epidemics beyond their own borders. Regardless of what flag was flying over Shanghai or Singapore, these port cities belonged to the world by virtue of the fact that nearly everyone shared an interest in making sure that trade flowed through them freely. When plague struck the great Asian trading hub of Hong Kong in 1894 colonial authorities sprang into action, establishing quarantine areas, distributing medicine and disinfectant and mobilising both British and Chinese charities to care for the afflicted.

They were not alone. Crisis in an international city prompted a global response, with epidemiologists from Europe, the US and Japan racing to be the first to isolate the bacillus. Although European and Japanese teams each made the discovery independently, it was the Swiss bacteriologist Alexandre Yersin (1863–1943) who eventually claimed naming rights over the plague bacteria now known as *Yersinia pestis*. When the same disease struck the Manchurian boomtown of Harbin in 1910 the Qing government convened an international conference of experts to come up with a solution. China realised how much was at stake. The plague came fast on the heels of the war between Russia and Japan and was concentrated along the railway, the heart of foreign interests in the region. China had to make some attempt to control the outbreak; doing nothing might be seen as an abdication of sovereignty. The response to plague in Asia showed a new appreciation that neither pathogens nor national interest stopped at national borders. Disease anywhere was now everybody's problem.

Rival religions

The final pillar of European interest in Asia was religion. Christian missionaries had been making the journey there in increasing numbers since the 16th century, almost as soon as the opening of the sea route round the south of Africa allowed them to do so without traversing Muslim lands. The first wave was the Jesuits, who set up in Goa and from there branched out to Malacca and Japan, all with an eye to the final prize of China. The Jesuits came to admire the lands they visited and developed a strategy of explaining Christianity, not only in local languages, but through the symbols and idioms of local beliefs. This conciliatory strategy endeared them to Asian elites, who regarded the highly educated priests as their peers, but put them into conflict with their own co-religionists. Arriving in Asia following very different experiences in Africa and the Americas, other denominations were far less conciliatory towards local beliefs. They claimed that the Jesuit approach bordered on idolatry and insisted that the Catholic faith must be inseparable from European language, dress and culture.

Two centuries later a new wave of Protestant missionaries in Asia would face the same question: what exactly had they come to preach? While 16th-century Jesuits stood in awe of a materially and culturally superior Asia, those of the 19th century became convinced of the White Man's Burden to civilise the continent. Even people like James Hudson Taylor (1832–1905), who instructed members of his China Inland Mission to dress, speak and live like Chinese, also recognised that one of the best ways to bring potential converts to the mission was to entice them with western education and medicine.

Throughout the world even long-established Christian communities remained under the care of missionaries, who tended to regard the native Christians as converts, rather than as equals within the faith. We might pause before judging the missionaries too harshly: looking out at the world from the apex of western power, delegates at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 saw the aggressive march of Anglo-American Protestantism (Catholic missions were not invited) as an irresistible force for good and envisioned the gospel radiating out to every corner of the globe. The small sprinkling of Asian Christians present at the conference clearly viewed things differently. Like the Jesuits two centuries earlier, they and their allies advocated adapting the Christian message to native spirituality, particularly in relation to Asia's great religions: Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. After lengthy debate the conference decided that making such comparisons risked diluting the uniqueness of the Christian revelation and, instead of conciliation, urged missionaries in the field to draw the 'frankest comparison' with native religions.

By the time the next major missionary conference was held in Jerusalem in 1928 things had changed. The First World War and the rise of the Soviet Union had weakened the confidence of the previous generation in the West's 'superior' civilisation and taken the wind out of the call to missionise the globe 'in our lifetimes'. Asian Christians themselves grew ever more active and vocal. Japanese Christians, although few in number, flatly rejected any suggestion of second class status. They were joined by a new generation of erudite Chinese Christians, such as Soong May-ling (1897–2003), the American-educated wife of Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975). More important, these communities had endured events such as the Boxer Rebellion in China and the 1919 independence movement in Korea, both of which visited disproportionate violence on Christians, and emerged with their faith unscathed. They could scarcely be called Christians in training and were no longer willing to be treated as such. While delegates in Edinburgh had politely broached the question of how Asian Christianity would eventually be accepted as an equal by the mission community, those in Jerusalem were more direct, demanding a specific timetable for when local churches would come under full Asian control.

The deteriorating political situation in the 1930s added ever more urgency to the question. The days when Europeans could protect their missionaries with gunboat diplomacy were a distant memory. Japan was growing increasingly aggressive in Manchuria and China and more openly hostile to the European powers in Asia, particularly Great Britain. This situation presented missionaries in Japanese areas with a difficult decision. Should they attempt to assuage Japanese suspicions by ceding authority to native Christians, or should they delay leaving and try to use the mission as a political shield? Anglo-American Protestants in Korea and Manchuria chose the latter path, a decision that eventually led to open confrontation in 1937, when the authorities forcibly replaced the missionaries with Japanese Christians.

The Catholic situation was more complex. The largest Catholic mission in East Asia was the French Missions Etrangères de Paris (MEP), which had a long history in Japan and a more sympathetic view of that country as a civilising force. A previous generation of MEP priests had already reached an accommodation with Japan at the time of its wars with China and Russia. Japanese Catholics had enthusiastically supported their nation as a chance to show their loyalty. The priests blessed troopships departing the docks and praised the patriotic valour of Catholic soldiers, such as the wounded lieutenant who shouted with his dying breath: ‘My heart with God and my body with the Emperor!’

Japan’s occupation of Manchuria in 1931, which was renamed Manchukuo early the following year, wrecked its relations with the Anglo-American powers. Yet even after the League of Nations condemned Manchukuo as a puppet of Japan, MEP priests, such as vicar apostolic Auguste Gaspais (1884–1952), continued to press an unwilling Vatican to establish rapprochement with the state. Such a request was particularly surprising coming from the French missions, which had for decades thwarted Rome’s attempts to build a diplomatic profile in Japan and China by invoking the French protectorate over the Church in China.

It was war with the Allies that finally forced a resolution. With hundreds of thousands of Catholics living under Japanese rule in China and Korea, and foreseeing the same outcome for Indochina and the Philippines, the Holy See moved from decades of indecision and established relations with Japan in 1942. This move, viewed with obvious dismay in Britain and the United States, was in fact entirely consistent with the Vatican’s long-held position of neutrality in conflict between states, a principle that it reaffirmed a month later when, this time against vigorous Japanese protests, it established relations with the nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek in Beijing.

The importance of culture

Much of the current discussion of how Asia will shape the coming century is based on culture. We are already seeing a more confident and vocal expression of alternative political and social ideas coming out of Asia and can no doubt expect to see much more in the future. The historiography of imperialism in Asia has revolved largely around the cultural encounter: the ideas that lay behind resistance, alternate conceptions of modernity and the voices that were suppressed.

Cultural perspectives are important, but on their own they can also be a bit of a red herring. Regardless of how Asia and the West may have perceived each other in cultural terms, the fact remains that neither had the ability to walk away from the relationship. This is why talk of the coming 'Asian century' is so misleading. In many ways the world was more connected in 1910 than it was in 1970. Sometimes, but not always, under the cover of empire, western interests spanned the globe, bringing wealth, knowledge and prestige back to the home countries, yet they also made themselves vulnerable to the same vicissitudes of markets and politics that we see today. Whether we are talking about diplomacy, finance, science or religion, the trajectory of the early 20th century is not of European imperialists blithely imposing their will and ways upon the world, but rather of a nimble yet vulnerable set of institutions that adapted to the threats, promises and opportunities of a rapidly changing world. Asia was as much a part of that world as it is of ours.

Thomas David DuBois is Senior Research Fellow in the History of China at the Australian National University's College of Asia and the Pacific.
