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Word Count: 1225

Global Asia Final

Asia is an area of the world whose power has been recently spreading very quickly. With its increasing power, many have come to think of the 21st century as the “Asian century.” While it might make sense due to the bigger role the countries in the area are playing globally, especially China, it doesn’t make sense to call the 21st century the Asian century.

Considering the century the Asian century would mean that Asia dominates the political, economic and social spheres, which is not the case. While there is heavy influence from Asia, most of the dominance comes from the United States.

Historically, Asia has always been important, with the Silk Roads being a prime example of something in the past which Asia used to influence. The Silk Roads were often used for trade making China and the rest of Asia important when it came to trade. Even though that was the case, the dominance of Europe in what would be considered “the west” today still caused the Silk Roads to come to an end “due to the growth of silk production and maritime trade in Europe” (chinahighlights.com). This problem for the Asian sphere was relevant back then and is still relevant today.

The primary example that can be used to represent this issue for Asia is the Belt and Road initiative that China is putting up. The BRI is “an ambitious global infrastructure platform to expand connectivity, economic integration, growth and cooperation across the globe” (Gallagher et al., 5). Essentially, it is trying to bring back the Silk Roads and expand China’s

trade network and influence globally. One could argue that this sort of global influence could be a sign that this is the Asian century. While it is the case that China is expanding its influence, it is mainly in third-world countries such as those in Africa and some in Latin America. The west, mainly the United States though is the dominant figure in the world when it comes to trade. The United States also has agreements with Latin American countries such as Mexico in Trump's reworked NAFTA as well as across the globe. Many of the countries in the EU and even some in Asia are part of Free Trade Agreements which the United States is the main actor in. What's more, the United States has even gone as far as to exclude China, to limit its power. If in trade and economics Asia's hegemon does not have power over the US, it is hard to consider this century the Asian century.

In South Korea, similar economic trends between Asia and countries outside of Asia can be seen. Chaebols, particularly Hyundai, are a good analysis. Historically, Hyundai has been around for a long time, having problems during the Korean war but eventually "emerged as a global competitor in the automobile industry" (Hemmert and Kim, 38). While admittedly a big competitor today and having spread to shipbuilding and other sectors back in the day, it is still hard to compare to the power of Elon Musk and his influence in this century. Just recently, "Elon Musk became the first person to reach a network of \$400 billion dollars" (CNN). Musk has much more influence than Hyundai in the motor industry as Tesla builds electric cars which are the cars of the future, and even through the media in X and space exploration. While yes, Asia has several successful companies, they are not able to compare to those of the United States. Not being dominant in the economy makes it hard to consider this the Asian century.

When it comes to social soft power, South Korea often is associated with having a good influence around the globe through means such as music. A prime example here is the K-pop

band BTS. Even in the US, BTS has had concerts that “are a spectacle as big as the Super Bowl” (Kim, 2022, 21). BTS could be considered a global phenomenon as they are popular and have much influence around the world. Although that may be the case, the United States again succeeds Asia in this sense through artists such as Taylor Swift. The influence that Swift has is much greater having had her Eras Tour all around the world and even being named Time’s person of the year in 2023 and Spotify’s top artist in 2024 (BBC). China itself has said that “the United States advances cultural hegemony. The real weapons in U.S. cultural expansion, it declared, were the production lines of Mattel Company” (Elizabeth, 2024, 2). The Mattel company had some social influence in the past year with the Barbie movie and its messages on patriarchy. These messages as well as Swift’s music are both examples as to how the United States surpasses Asia when it comes to social influence, so it is hard to consider the 21st century the Asian century.

Fertility issues are something else that is affecting Asia. In fact, “lowest-low fertility countries are found in Southern and Eastern Europe and East Asia” (Anderson and Kohler, 2013, 199). This is partly due to the strong social stigmas around having the best education possible in Asia and the expense that causes. This is also a problem that the US faces but on a much lower scale, therefore not affecting it as much as it does Asia. It is known that Asia has a fertility issue, all rooted in social problems that do not have such an impact in the US.

Finally, to understand why the 21st century is not the Asian century, politics must also be analyzed. Particularly in Taiwan and China’s thoughts on it. Recently, “Beijing seeks to transform the island into a special administrative region of the People’s Republic of China PRC, using the same formula that it employed for Hong Kong” (Bush, 2021, 9). There have been many protests recently in Taiwan in the way that China is taking an approach to as it is trying to claim

power over the island. It has even gone as far to prevent the island from calling itself Taiwan in the Olympics and other sports events. Admittedly, this is a problem that the US has invested much of its time in as Taiwan is an important partner to them in the region. Although that is the case, it is hard to consider this political issue one of the Asian century. This is especially the case when the ongoing wars in Isreal as well as Ukraine and Russia have more global political attention on those issues. Countries in the EU and the US have all spent much time and money especially with the conflict in Europe. The existence of these conflicts and the lack of attention from other countries besides the United States on the problems of Taiwan also make it hard to argue that this is the Asian century as Asian politics are far from dominating the globe.

While China and the countries in Asia have a big influence when it comes to the economy, socially and politically, their influence is nowhere near as huge of that of the west, most notably the United States. The US dominates the globe in these three aspects and Asia, while heavily influencing them in some cases, does not dominate one, making it hard to make the argument that the 21st century is the Asian century.

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