

The Rise of Asia: Ambition and Division

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1. COMMON HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ASIA

- **Colony and Domination**

At the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, most Asian countries were under feudalism. However, after their regimes were weakened, they were gradually invaded by the European Empire, and finally all countries were colonized. Under such circumstances, only Japan remained independent and developed rapidly, especially its economy, making it a unique empire in Asia.

At the first half of the 20th century, almost all Asian countries, exploited as colonies, were dipped in poverty, backward and exhaustion of natural resources as they were taken by large dominating countries in the West. Intellectual life went underdeveloped. Many areas were damaged by wars. At that time, China was split into many sub-regions dominated by the alliance of eight European countries, India, Java, Singapore, Malaca, Burma, and also United Kingdom's colony. Indochina belonged to France. One typical example is Vietnam, occupied by French from 1884 to 1945, lasting 61 years until it was dominated by Japan for a short period of time. After Japan surrendered at the end of World War II, Vietnam engaged in fighting against French from 1945 to 1954, and then in the war with U.S. army until 1975. For over 100 years, Vietnam was in existence with wars only. After 40 years from the end of these wars, Vietnam is still a less-developed country in the world.

- **Strong Rise at the End of the 20th Century**

At the end of the 20th century, after overcoming the black period, Japan became a powerful country and ranked the second across the world. Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, and Hong Kong were regarded as "4 dragons of Asia" developing at miraculous speed, with GDPs higher than that of many European countries. Until now, China has taken the position of Japan. Though Japan is ranked the second, both Japan and Korea are very powerful. India has an emerging economy with global impact. Asian countries, leading by Singapore and Indonesia, are growing fast. It can be said that the end of the 20th century and the early 21st are the time of Asians rising.

- **Foundation for Future Sustainable Development?**

However, looking at the whole scene of Asia, growing in economy does not mean growing in value, social indicators as shown by examples below:

Inside the nations:



Figure 1: Asia’s Harsh Enviroments for the Media as in the year 2016.¹

External debates:

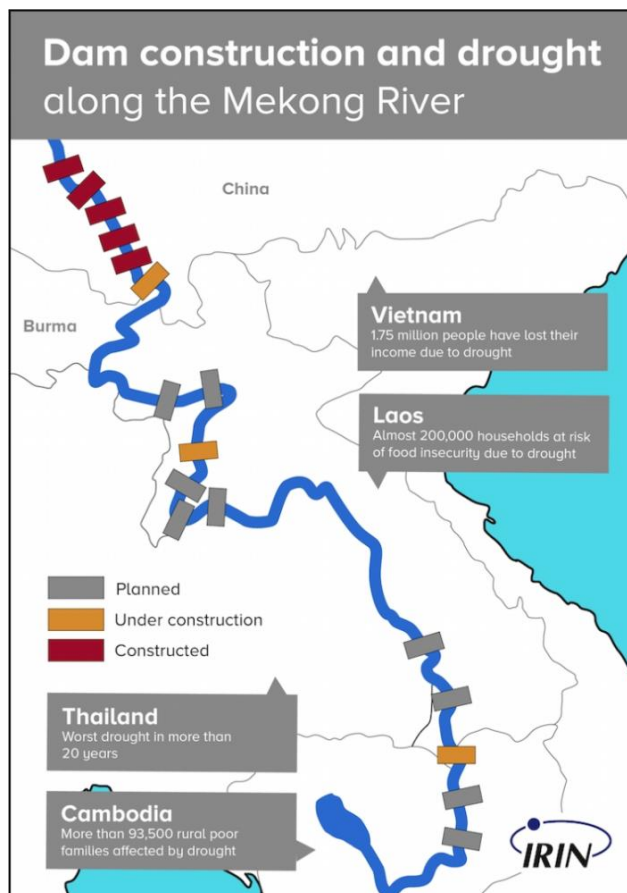


Figure 2: Cooperation for the Environment Protection.²

¹ Reporters Without Borders, “Ranking 2016,” <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2016/>.

Figure 3: Dispute on Sea Territories.³

These major issues highlighted above together with many other unstable conditions gradually make Asia's development lack of cooperation and sustainability.

2. ASIAN COMMON GROUND

• The Silence of the Crowds

Most Asian people have undergone thousand years of feudalism, colonialism, empire domination, and then communist regime. As a result, the majority of the Asian countries, especially China, Vietnam, and North Korea, as well as dictatorial militaries in Myanmar, can relate to European democracy and civilization in a limited condition.

Their ancestors used to be dominated, and are now held back under the severe control so their whole life is covered mostly by fierce and silence. They do not dare speak out. As time goes by, this behavior has shaped their closed culture and politics, which go against the normal democracy and civilization we have seen in the West.

In this circumstance, women are awfully treated and children are educated with prejudice and dogma while men become paternalistic. Nuclear family in such society, though visually seems to be fully traditional with many ancient values retained for thousands of years, is internally exposed to serious violations of human rights, including early marriage, polygamy in India, favoring male offspring over females in China, and discrimination against women in Islamic countries like Indonesia—all of which are denounced by the whole world.

² Jennifer Rigby, "Dams, Drought and Disaster along the Mekong River," *IRIN*, May 10, 2016. <http://www.irinnews.org/news/2016/05/10/dams-drought-and-disaster-along-mekong-river> (accessed December 2016).

³ Source: UNCLOS and CIA.

Despite the suffering from ill treatment, little voice is raised from the victims of those countries themselves; most of them decide to remain silent or continue to torment themselves. This is a typical style of Asians.

- **Respect Traditions and Family Values**

One of the common grounds people may find in Asia is that Asians respect traditions and family values. They can forget personal values to devote themselves to family and clan. There are many Asian proverbs such as “One has a high position, all his family will have benefit.” And “family-controlled corporate groups” are very prosperous companies in South Korea, China, Thailand, and even Japan. But most of those committed, loyal people cannot overcome the barriers of families, clans, and realms. Even a man can sacrifice the benefit of community for his family or his clan’s benefit. So far, he can sacrifice the benefit of human for his realm or his country’s benefit. He is not aware that before he becomes someone’s parents or brothers, or an individual belonging to a family, clan, country and so on, he is “a man of humanity.”

- **Dangers of Extreme Nationalism**

While we place importance on concepts such as “respect traditions and family values,” hanging onto one’s tradition or past, or adoring one’s national history, culture, and religion against that of other people can easily lead to “extreme nationalism” and disunite people. As a result, ethnic conflicts, religious wars, or terrorism occur.

- **Conservatives vs. Extreme-Democrats**

Especially nowadays, many people do not feel comfortable accepting differences, although Asia has much diversity. I found out that in Asia, there exist two kinds of people:

- **Conservatives:** These people are afraid of change while they continue to keep obsolete traditional values and reject Western styles in an extreme manner. They always try to preserve their customs. One of the characteristics of this type of people can be found in their mindset about improvement: they do not see the need for investment in improvement. National leaders of this type can be identified through their decision to keep their dictatorial control following backward thinking. Typical examples are remaining communist countries in Asia like China, North Korea, and Vietnam. Nevertheless, this type is not as harmful as the newly-appeared types that I am going to mention below.
- **Extreme-Democrats:** These people adore all theories of democracy. You may think that they respect differences? But actually not. They are the ones who are ready to criticize

anything that differs from what they call democracy or what they are worshiping, regardless of what others advocate for, or whether their claims are right or wrong. The most typical example is the latest US presidential election. The Republican Party is a party that follows policies and orientations that can serve the US citizens, and is acknowledged as a legitimate party and followed by many people in the United States. When the Republican Party won the election with its representative, Donald Trump, not only in the United States itself but also in Asia including small countries such as Vietnam, conflicts rose and people were divided.

It is hard for me to understand why these conflicts occur, as the Democratic Party is not an angel and the Republican Party is not a demon. They are just options for the citizens of the United States, the most civilized society in the world. Why are those people standing for Trump are criticized and discriminated? Are they evil to choose Trump? The so-called democracy does not mean that it represents everyone's opinion or all related values, and other parties with other names do not mean that they are not democratic. Both the two large parties are serving for the strongest intellectual civilization in the world.

However, many democrats who were supporting Hillary Clinton, on behalf of democracy, criticized Trump and his followers. I myself was criticized and insulted by many people leaning towards democracy, just because I held the view that the concept "Make America Great Again" by Donald Trump was smart and suitable for the US current context and I had also presumed that Trump would win the election. However, Trump is not a dictatorial person who wants to stage a coup d'état or become an illegally-voted president in the United States. He has suffered a lot from criticism from the media. But I believe the reports by media can simply be tricks to gain power among political parties.

Therefore, these differences in perspectives indicate whether the so-called intellectuals really make advancement in society and understand Asia and democracy to respect different perspectives, or they are just theoretical. The fact that they are worshiping democracy in an extreme way had me think about the possibility of a new dictatorial style, which is very dangerous and has a big influence on the young generation. As the young generation thinks that these fanatic democrats are the representatives of democracy to lean on, there is an increasing possibility that they will become "new dictatorial people."

3. WHAT IS THE AMBITION OF ASIA IN THE FUTURE?

- **World Economic Forecast up to 2060**






	Present	2030	2060	No.
 US	23%	18%	17%	3
 China	17%	28%	28%	1
 India	7%	11%	18%	2
 Euro	17%	12%	9%	4
 Japan	7%	4%	3%	5

Figure 4: Shift in the Share of World GDP by 2060.⁴

- China, the most crowded country in the world, will become the strongest country in 2030, according to OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) forecasts.
- The next will be India, reaching close to Europe in the 2030s and going beyond EU, ranked the second in Asia after China.
- Under the economic cooperation of such countries as Japan, Indonesia, and Singapore, Asia will lead the world in the near future.

4. DIVISION IN AMBITION IN ASIA

- **Why We Have TPP**

The main objective of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is to eliminate taxes and barriers for commodity, import, and export activities among the member nations, including the United States, Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, Brunei, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico, Chile, and Peru. Moreover, TPP will unify many common rules and principles among these countries regarding, for instance, intellectual properties, food quality, or labor safety by reducing tariff barriers (or in some cases, even completely eliminating tariff barriers for the members) while it helps increase the commodity and trade exchanges. Together with the rise in capital flow, TPP is expected to push the economic growth of its 12 member nations.

In addition, all 12 nations are members of Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) whose region accounted for 39% of the world's population in 2015 with economies

⁴ Source: *The Guardian*.

valued at 43 trillion USD making 59% of the world's nominal GDP. The APEC region's trade in merchandise goods and commercial services reached 20 trillion USD in 2015, which was almost half (48%) of the world's total trade.⁵ So, once TPP comes into effect, it can create a common market with great potential for many enterprises.

Moreover, it is vital to pay attention to the fact that this is US initiatives. The United States has the biggest economic power across the world and has always considered Asia-Pacific as a key to its future development. Some may comment that the United States is trying to use TPP as a way to compete with China in this area. Many people also believe that other members of APEC will join TPP in coming years, making TPP more important.

- **What Is Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)?**

Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is a proposed free trade agreement (FTA) between the ten member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) including Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam and the six states, Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand, with which ASEAN has existing FTAs.

RCEP negotiations were formally launched in November 2012 at the ASEAN Summit in Cambodia. RCEP is viewed as an alternative to TPP trade agreement, which excludes China and India.

- **What Affects the Role and the Partnership of China, Japan, and India in Asia?**

Looking through the members of TPP and RCEP, we can see economic confrontation of the two strong leaders, the United States and China. Whereas TPP excludes China, RCEP excludes the United States. More specifically, while TPP is considered as a treaty to help the United States to prevent the impact of China in Asia by helping the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand to take advantage of human resources, as well as natural resources of the neighboring developing countries, RCEP is a convention that helps China lead Asian economy without the influence of the United States.

However, the important thing here is connectivity, the alliance's supportive role of Asian countries. When the majority of these countries are negotiating to join TPP to go against China or RCEP to go against the United States, what are they actually concerned about? Of course, the national benefit is their top priority. When joining either TPP or RCEP, all countries can benefit. However, with this kind of action, I wonder whether the alliance among Asian countries can find a mutual trust in one another to aim at one common vision for the whole development in the future?

⁵ "APEC in Charts 2016," APEC Policy Support Unit, Singapore, (ISBN 978-981-11-1158-7), November 2016. http://publications.apec.org/publication-detail.php?pub_id=1773 (accessed December 2016).

Looking at a world economy forecast up to 2060, we can see that with China, Japan, and India, together with the strength of ASEAN, Asia will be the biggest economy in the world. Having the most crowded labor force today, this region has the largest number of consumers. In addition, Asia is leading the world in terms of military and economic potentials.

While existing problems include disagreement in the past concerning World War II and litigation for borders, difference in each country's political system, and other disagreements between China and Japan, as well as China and India, is it possible for these 3 countries to integrate for a common community with the same vision for Asia? The problems do not include the disagreement of China toward ASEAN regarding East Sea (dispute island) and the upstream of Mekong River (hydro power station), all of which are concerns difficult to be settled in harmony. I also wonder whether China, a strong but dictatorial and isolated country, will be open to other countries and change its national policy for a common benefit of the community, and of the human kind.

Most recently (as of December 2016), Donald Trump declared to withdraw from TPP when he officially becomes US president the following year, making this treaty lose its strength to an unimportant level. Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo thought that without the United States, TPP is meaningless. However, it can be an opportunity for China and RCEP. Does China take this opportunity with an open mind and a willingness to cooperate and share benefits with its neighbors to make Asia become a strong community both economically and politically and have the region released from the impact of the United States? Many Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, Philippines, and Myanmar, however, are not interested in going on the same line with China; they prefer to ally themselves with the West like the United States.

- **Asia's Current Conditions**

Regarding political or economic ambition in Asia, there exist conflicting cases. With a leading economy, China is dictatorial following communism. In those with open politics and close relationship with Western countries, the economy is regressing, which is the case of Japan. This makes Asia's ambition separated and the treaties or conventions are linked weakly and become fragile. For example regarding ASEAN, in my opinion, I do not see any benefit for the members to have joined this community. This is a loosely-connected community, and there are always conflicts in exchange of benefit for all members and the achievements gained so far are not significant.

5. HOW CAN WE CREATE VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE?

• How to Form Common Values and Visions for the Future?

1) *Exchanging Cultures, Enhancing Understanding, Sharing and Respecting Differences:*

Asia Leadership Fellow Program (ALFP) encourages such activities as exchange of cultures and opinions for enhancing mutual understanding and sharing and respecting differences among others. Moreover, this can be done in the field of art like literature, painting, movie, and music. Today in Asia there are more and more cultural festivals, including film and music festivals across continents. Thanks to that, many artists and intellectuals across Asia can come closer to each other and help one another improve their own understanding of others through more sharing. Asian cultures and arts are becoming more and more powerful given their diversities and unique characteristics. Nowadays, comic books like Japanese manga, K-Pop, and Korean movies are enjoyed across Asia on a daily basis. This helps shape a wide community of readers and audiences with somewhat similar habits, hobbies, and styles. They are a young population with similar cultural values who are gradually shaping a community across Asia and creating a distinctive Asian face with many common values.

2) *Common Visions toward Economy and Politics:*

Understanding each other is vital, but how we can respect differences to develop together is even more important particularly in the aspect of social customs and regimes. I believe one of the basic factors or the foundations to make up and run society is each country's viewpoint about politics and economy, especially when there are still many backward and dictatorial regimes existing in Asia.

And given the present situation in Asia, it is important to point out that solutions that have been found effective by social movement leaders of the countries ruled by dictators today include expanding of people's knowledge, developing civil society, and creating peaceful, civilized common grounds through the interaction with the existing regime, within the existing political environment. In order to reach growing civil society, it is imperative to have enough knowledge, be capable of receiving different opinions, and replace old-style thinking leaders. We also need to ensure innovation based on a platform for peace and reserve national resources for the integration process, which will contribute to the Asian community in particular and human kind in general. We do not need any more violence or war. Myanmar is a great example for the replacement of power in peace, from an authoritarian regime to democracy.

Being a communicator, writer, and editor, everyday, I am tirelessly fighting through my works and my media campaigns to create a new look for my young readers and audiences, and to escape from the strict censorship of the administration. I have lots of friends who were put in jail, evicted out of Vietnam, or put under house arrest only because they were fighting

for change, seeking a fairer and more democratic society. Having learned from them, I have chosen to become more flexible, more peaceful, and more constructive while accepting differences and the capacity of the current government. This is all because I believe democracy means nothing if you do not accept differences as well as others' political views.

3) Establish A System of Education Based on Shared Values, Shared Elite Talents, and Knowledge for the Common Ground of the Future:

How about a new organization called Asia Future Academy?

I wish that in future Asia, there will be famous universities like Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Cambridge, and Oxford. What I have in my mind is not just a university but an academy, and it will be for individuals with outstanding talents and those who are in unfortunate situations because of his or her birthplace or the environment in which he or she was brought up.

In this academy, students are trained comprehensively by top professors not only for academic research but also for work skill reinforcement. They will be offered the most advanced education specifically designed based on the nature, competency, and the mindset of the Asian. The academy will also teach values, strategies, and programs that are long enough to shape a new class of young genius in Asia with full of Asian characters, making them powerful enough to lead the world in the most civilized approach. In the near future, we can expect to welcome an era when Asia becomes the largest economy in the world.

4) Economic Cooperation Community Is Really Strong and Reliable while Being Capable of Sharing and Getting Support from Big Nations:

As mentioned in part 4, Asia is ambitious with great potential but it is extensively divided and has not absorbed the idea that the strong one will offer the weaker one, as seen in the alliance between the United States and Japan or Korea. Only when Asia gains a sense of trust and unity, can it become a sustainably strong community.