

ASIA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By William H. McNeill

Recent events offer an apt metaphor for Asia's twentieth century. Between 1900 and 2000, a North Atlantic human tsunami crested and then withdrew, leaving behind radically changed social landscapes after ten decades of widespread disruption. Asia was not alone. The whole world went through the same experience—not least Europe and America, located at the epicenter of the entire upheaval. After-effects still persist, and intensified communication means that rapid readjustments to the North Atlantic human tsunami will continue for a long time to come.

Yet some aspects of twentieth century history cannot be replicated, most notably the four-fold increase in human numbers. That was perhaps the most important change of the century. Such runaway population growth is comparable only to the multiplication of numbers that took place during the millennia when human hunting bands first expanded around the earth, and to the population increases that accompanied the shift from foraging to food production between about 8000 and 4000 BCE. In all three instances, Asia was where the human majority lodged and where the demographic surge was numerically greatest. It has begun to subside as birthrates fall, but it is far from over.

The North Atlantic human tsunami had three principal aspects. Politically it involved imperial expansion by Europeans and Americans, who overthrew or intruded upon Asian governments, thanks to transitory military advantages. Economically, cheap machine-made goods from European and American factories and mills deprived millions of Asian (and European) artisans of their livelihood, profoundly disrupting older patterns of urban life. Last but not least, North Atlantic missionaries, soldiers, rulers, and merchants propagated new ideas and practices among Asians about everything under the sun, partly intentionally, partly inadvertently. The overall effect was to upset older social relationships among Asian (and other) peoples, and, sooner or later, to

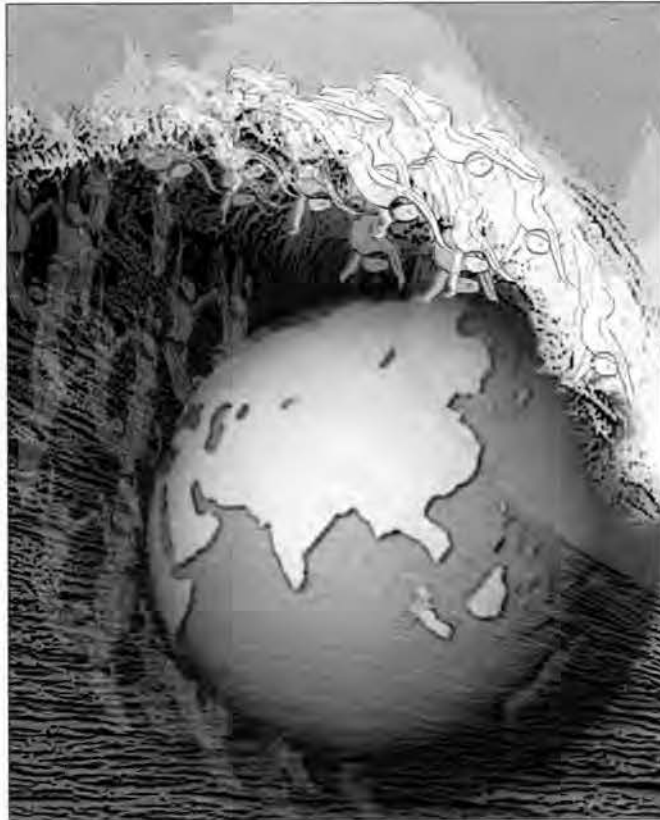


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wholesale social change runs faster and deeper than ever before among all the peoples of the earth.

A century ago in Asia, the assault of the North Atlantic human tsunami was in full spate. Only in remote, inhospitable regions, like the interior of the Arabian peninsula, Mongolia, and Tibet, did older lifestyles remain almost unaffected by the intrusion of Europeans and Americans intent on converting the heathen and/or making their fortunes by trade, by conquest, and by combinations of the two. Resulting changes centered mainly in cities. Until after 1950, the peasant majority struggled to accommodate the rapid growth of numbers, for the most part within a framework of traditional village ways.

discredit many old habits and ideas, making way for new.

Two factors gave the North Atlantic human tsunami its extraordinary power. One was the fact that North Atlantic peoples pioneered vastly enhanced exploitation of fossil fuels, thus expanding their command of mechanical power for war, manufacture, transport, and communication. Asians soon came to understand the advantages of mechanical power, and after about 1950 some Asians started to catch up and then began to surpass European and American market success.

A second underlying factor was change in ecological relationships. North Atlantic populations and then other peoples learned new ways to satisfy their wishes by tinkering with biological processes inside their own bodies and among domesticated plants and animals. Longer life spans and enlarged food supplies were the most important results. Hence the population surge. Unintended side effects of urbanization and industrialization on the entire ecosystem were also enormous and are only partially understood. But the overall effect of innumerable new machines powered by fossil fuels and of far-reaching ecological changes is clear, enlarging the human niche in the ecosystem in what may turn out to be an unsustainable fashion. Only time will tell. In the meanwhile,

In 1900, Japan in the east and the Ottoman Empire in the west had gone furthest in altering local political and social arrangements in an effort to retain local sovereignty. Japan swiftly succeeded in joining the circle of imperial states, attacking China (1894–95), defeating the Russians in Manchuria (1904–05), and annexing Korea (1910). Japan's military success against Russia had an electric effect among Asian elites, showing, as it did, that Europeans were not as invincible as they had seemed.

But radical efforts at reform could also backfire, as the Turks discovered when subject peoples withdrew allegiance from the imperial Ottoman government—only, in most cases, to fall under European control after World War I. Consequently, in the 1920s, League of Nations “mandates” over former Ottoman provinces in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine marked the high-water mark of French and British political expansion into Asia.

Elsewhere, ineffectual efforts to resist intrusive Europeans and Americans prevailed through the first two decades of the twentieth century. Then, after 1921, the tide turned as European and American power slackened. Marxist revolutionaries, inspired by the Communists' victory in Russia, offered new challenges to imperial rulers and foreign businessmen almost everywhere. So did militarized, modernizing nationalist governments in Turkey and in China, while the Indian National Congress embarrassed the British by endorsing Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent campaigns of civil disobedience in the 1930s.

World War II discredited European, American, and Japanese empires in Asia. Philippine independence (1946), swiftly followed by the partition of the British Raj between an independent India and Pakistan (1947) and by the Communist seizure of power in China (1949), signified the precipitous political-military withdrawal of the North Atlantic human tsunami that had seemed so irresistible in 1900. In Southeast Asia the collapse of European empires took longer—most agonizingly in Vietnam, where first French (1954) and then American armed forces were foiled and withdrew finally only in 1973.

But political independence did not check the process of incorporating Asian societies into a worldwide market of goods and services for very long. Local violence could and did interfere, and ambitious new governments tried to go it alone for a while, hoping to build a



Judge, April 22, 1905, cover image with the caption: An Easter(n) Surprise.
Source: Graphic Image Web site at <http://graphicwitness.org/group/outer.htm>

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more just society within their own borders. But efforts to achieve economic autarchy proved costly. Officials were often incompetent or corrupt. Spectacular economic successes in Japan in the 1950s, where national economic management was directed towards increasing exports, and in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, where market forces were more fully unleashed, soon persuaded other Asian governments to follow suit. That was true even in countries where Communist or Islamist ideologies officially prevailed, as they did in China, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. To be sure, at the end of the century, Burmese generals and North Korean Communists continued to maintain a strenuous isolation from the outer world. But they remained exceptions, and their policies were very costly to the peoples involved.

Everywhere else, participation in worldwide markets opened up new urban jobs. Japan led the way, launching itself on a sustained economic boom after 1949. All of a sudden Japanese watches, automobiles, audio-visual devices, and other high-tech exports were the cheapest and soon became the best in the world, thanks to skilled engineering and abundant labor working under the direction of a cooperating network of bankers, government officials, and industrial managers.

Japan showed that Asians could out-do former imperialists economically. Their example soon spread to

Korea and found spectacular reinforcement in China, where after 1976 the Communist regime decided to permit peasants to sell their crops more freely. Then the Chinese government allowed entrepreneurs to import capital (initially mainly from Taiwan) for building new factories in coastal cities to produce cheap, high-quality goods for export, taking advantage of abundant labor coming from the overpopulated countryside just as Japanese businessmen had done.

In China, Korea, and Japan, rapid industrialization brought with it the environmental pollution and sweatshop conditions that had characterized industrial revolutions elsewhere. But this time the pace was faster than ever before, drastically altering billions of lives, both in East Asia and wherever the flood of goods manufactured in that region was sold.

India too relaxed official barriers to market forces, and some of its provinces, mainly in the south, took conspicuous part in the recent computerization of the world by providing a variety of office and record-keeping services for businesses based in the United

States and Europe. But Muslim lands in western Asia did not share either the manufacturing boom of East Asia or the services boom of India. Instead, their part in the world's economy turned largely on an oil bonanza, dating back to the beginning of the century. Oil was entangled in politics from the start and sustained diverse, often militarized and authoritarian governments.

But the nasty mix took a new turn when the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel by force of arms in 1948 shocked and offended Arabs and other Muslims. European and especially American support for the Jewish state and successes by Israeli armed forces in repelling Arab assaults and expanding Israel's borders kept tensions high throughout the rest of the century. American invasions of Iraq in 1991, of Afghanistan in 2001, and of Iraq again in 2003 added to the turmoil; and violent resistance to the victorious Americans continues with no end in sight.

Warfare and sporadic violence accelerated economic changes too—sometimes merely destructively, but not always so, as Japan's initial successes before 1941 and Israel's agricultural and industrial development since 1948 show. But, overall, nothing resembling the economic take-off that took place in Japan, Korea, China, India, and smaller states of Southeast Asia after 1950 manifested itself in Western Asia and is unlikely to do so as long as political-military violence persists.

Northern Asia, too, did not share in the recent economic surge. To be sure, oil and mineral resources across the vast expanse of Siberia underwent considerable development between the 1930s and 1991, but Soviet management relied in large part on prison camp labor; and the political breakup of the USSR in 1991, though remarkably peaceful, disrupted the supply of compulsory labor. Alternative forms of labor and management have been slow to emerge. Soviet planners also coerced the inhabitants of the river valleys and agriculturally-marginal steppe lands of Soviet Asia to enlarge production of wheat and cotton with some success. But ecological damages and water shortages have recently reversed that trend. Altogether, errors and excesses of Communist economic policy have not yet been overcome.



A satellite television dish outside a herding family's home in the Gobi region of Mongolia. Still Image from *The Weeping Camel*, a documentary film by Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falorni. ©2003 ThinkFilm.

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Acute problems exist elsewhere, and political frictions between India and Pakistan, China and Taiwan, North and South Korea also exist. But if one tries for a general overview, it seems to me that throughout Asia (and much of the rest of the world) the most fundamental social instability arises from the way local villages have recently lost their traditional autonomy by engaging on an unprecedented scale in urban-based market exchanges. Commercialization does indeed sometimes increase incomes, but it also means facing new risks of price fluctuation that can be almost as crippling as crop failure, war, or disease have always been for peasant farmers.

More significantly, commercialization also means that local ways of life and the web of personal relationships that kept village society together and made life meaningful have recently been challenged by urban outlooks and expectations that new communications, especially radio and TV, brought to peasants' consciousness. Villages where population growth was already straining the social fabric and where migration into

cities, far and near, was already siphoning off many youths were especially liable to encounter disorienting novelties. Since the great majority of Asians are peasants and ex-peasants, the resulting culture shock, intensified by frequent disappointment of hopes for a more comfortable life, gives rise to a seething cauldron of discontent. This reality assures continued political and social instability throughout Asia and all the rest of the world until a new, more stable urban-rural balance emerges, if it ever does. ■

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