

Asia Society Center will help make Houston part of the Pacific Century

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By Charles C. Foster

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The April 12-15 opening of the [Asia Society Texas Center](#)'s extraordinary new home on two blocks of land in the [Houston Museum District](#) is a seminal event for our city. The center will instantaneously become a jewel in the architectural crown of Houston, alongside the Menil Collection building designed by Renzo Piano and the Caroline Wiess Law Building of the [Museum of Fine Arts of Houston](#) designed by [Mies van der Rohe](#). The new Asia Society Texas Center was designed by [Yoshio Taniguchi](#), considered one of the world's leading architects, whose major remodeling of [the Museum of Modern Art](#) in New York in 2004 was widely praised. Now Houston will boast the first free-standing original Yoshio Taniguchi building in the United States.

Our lack of knowledge of the diverse Asian cultures and history was the very reason that [John D. Rockefeller III](#) founded the Asia Society in 1956. He wanted to help bring about a greater understanding and more partnerships between the peoples and institutions of the U.S. and Asia. Through our new home in the Museum District, we will be able to continue to focus on important Asian policy and business issues in our new Edward Rudge Allen III Educational Center, as we have since the founding of the Asia Society Texas Center in 1979 by foresighted Houstonians, including [Barbara Bush](#). We will also be able to provide greater cultural programming.

We will open our new center with an exhibition of Treasures of Asian Art from John D. Rockefeller III's Asian art collection, one of the world's finest, in our new Louisa Stude Sarofim Art Gallery, and we will inaugurate our beautiful [Brown Foundation Performing Arts Theater](#) with performers representing the diverse cultures of Asia.

We will continue to emphasize education as well as policy programs, language classes, student tours and educational travels. It is estimated that in China alone more than 400 million Chinese have learned or are in the process of learning English, which is a staggering figure, given the fact that it is larger than the entire population of the United States. China, India and Korea are sending approximately 350,000 college students per year to the United States. In contrast, the United States is sending only about 13,000 college students to Asia per year. If the United States is to compete in a growing interdependent global economy where the biggest part of that economy is growing in Asia, we will have to encourage our students and future leaders in business and government to have a greater international awareness and language skills, particularly as it relates to Asia.

The fastest growing populations in Houston are Asians who are overwhelmingly first generation Asian immigrants. Congress, under President [Lyndon Baines Johnson](#) in 1965, abolished the [National Origin System](#) and mandated immigration based upon the principle of family

unification and job skills. Since the early 1970s, large numbers of well educated Asians have immigrated to and benefited Houston. With the exception of the Vietnamese community that came largely as refugees, most Asians immigrated based on professional job skills and investment. As a result, we have successful Chinese, Indian, Vietnamese, Korean and Pakistani communities, each near or in excess of 100,000, and smaller Filipino, Indonesian, Japanese, Thai and other Asian communities. Most of those communities have grown in Houston near or outside of Beltway 8. While these Asian communities each have their community centers, the new Asia Society Texas Center will provide a platform for them in the Museum District to focus on policy and cultural programming.

But the new Asia Society Texas Center is even more significant in what it means to Houston as a great international city. We are rightly proud of being the gateway to Mexico. Yet it is often said the 21st century will be called the "[Pacific Century](#)," and the extraordinary economic development in Asia will clearly affect the role Houston plays in the global economy for the rest of our lives as well as those of our children and grandchildren.

The decision by Continental Airlines to inaugurate a direct Houston-Tokyo flight, the oil and gas industry, university ties and the symbolism of the stardom of [Li Cunxin](#) in the cultural world and then the international impact of super star [Yao Ming](#) in the sports world all linked Houston to Asia. Now, with the dedication of the new Asia Society Texas Center, Houston is making a major statement that the city will be part of the Pacific Century. While the G-7 nations account for 65 percent of the world economy, according to [World Bank](#) statistics, within several decades Asian economies will account for 65 percent of the world economy with China and India alone accounting for 50 percent. This will cause a tectonic shift in the way we need to look at the world.

To put these changes in perspective, China and India accounted for more than 50 percent of the world's economy as late as 1820, with both countries having a long history and continuity of government going back, in the case of China, more than 3,000 years. In comparison, the United States has been a major economy for less than 200 years. If we are to retain our position in the world economy and global leadership and not be viewed historically as a temporary aberration in the world economic order, then the U.S. will have to be even more engaged with the world and particularly Asia. It is in that milieu that the new Asia Society Texas Center in the Museum District will be able to play an even more effective role and signal to the rest of the United States that Houston will play a leading role in these exciting new developments.

Foster is chairman of the board of the Asia Society Texas Center and co-chairman of FosterQuan, LLP.

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