

ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEWS

The EU through the Eyes of Asia: Media, Public and Elite Perceptions in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Thailand, edited by Martin Holland, Peter Ryan, Alojzy Z. Nowak and Natalia Chaban, Singapore-Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2007, 301 pp.

How do Asians view the European Union (EU)? In what ways and under what capacity are the union frequently portrayed by Asian media? A crucial question then follows: is the EU an important entity for the Chinese, Japanese, Singaporeans, Koreans and Thais? In essence these are the issues this book tackles. To answer these questions, it combines rigorous and in-depth analysis of media evaluation, public opinion survey and interviews with country elites. Four frames, namely the EU as an economic actor, the EU as a political actor, the EU as a social actor and the EU as an environmental actor, were employed to look at the depiction of the union in the media and the perceptions of the public and elites of the union. In addition, the portrayal and views are further evaluated to be positive, negative or neutral. The extensive nature of the research project supported by empirically rich data certainly provided insights and deeper understanding on how these selected Asian countries view the EU. For this reason, the book is a must read for those working in the EU-Asia relations or seeking an understanding of how Asian media, public and elites perceive the union.

As most of us may not be aware of the history and nature of the relations between the EU and Asia, the topic is given special attention in the prologue written by Bertrand Fort, Deputy Executive Director of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). Touching on the past, present and future of the EU-Asia relations, the prologue provided background information of the importance of the EU not only to Asia but also at the international level as the reader went through the rest of the book. Part I of the book consists of an introductory chapter—which details out the background of the research project while at the same time highlighting key findings of subsequent chapters—and a methodology chapter—that deals with how the research was designed and executed. Six chapters make up Part II and these chapters are certainly the heart of the book. It is in these chapters that country studies are presented. Comparisons of

key findings and common themes were taken up in Part III. The book concludes with a chapter in Part IV that raises issues of the union's lack of visibility which as a result, downplaying its significant existence in these countries. These are crucial issues for the union's future agenda both internally as well as externally.

However, this is not to say that the book is without flaws. As a product of a research project, this book has the tone of a report at times. This is especially discernable when the reader went through Chapters 3 to 8 where each individual chapter reported on the respective country study conducted. Indeed, when the reader reached Chapter 5 where the picture of the union's place in Japan was painted, the answers to the questions posed earlier became clear: the EU is not as visible in Asia as it ought to and it is most visible as an economic and political actor. This is not for the lack of effort by each chapter authors as each chapter provided detail discussion on how the research was carried out in respective locations as well as—and more importantly—the findings of the research, illuminating these findings against the research questions the study seek to answer. Yet despite this strength, and probably due to a somewhat standard presentation style, it was admittedly a tedious task reading through these main chapters. Subsequent three chapters that follow, however, are more interesting to read as each pits the country findings against another while at the same time accentuating common themes that emerged from the findings and relating it to the bigger picture of the union's identity.

In all the countries where the research was conducted, the EU is a major trading partner. Due to this, it is dominantly presented and perceived in economic terms, perpetuating its image of a bloc with economic prowess. Next to this, it is then often portrayed as a political actor. However, in both cases, the EU is often overshadowed by other giants. In the case of Japan, for example, the EU is disproportionately depicted

against ally the United States. Thailand demonstrated a different pattern whereby the EU is portrayed first as a political actor and second as an economic actor. Thailand's internal political development at the time of the research provided the background of such pattern as the development in return affected the kingdom's relation with the union.

It is important to note though, that despite its lack of visibility in these countries, the union is not portrayed or perceived negatively. In fact, it is often viewed either positively or neutrally. An exception to this trend is found in Singapore where the EU is evaluated rather negatively regarding news related to local interest such as the avian flue and Islamic issues. The same can be concluded about the public and elites' views of the union. Regardless of the lack of knowledge on the part of the public and the elites' often times stereotype images of the EU, it is ranked relatively high in terms of its importance to each country, although it may not necessarily captured the reality of the union's role in the respective countries. In addition, its economic role is often highlighted by the elite groups. Some elites, on the other hand, doubted the impact the union can bring to political issues at the global level. Going back to the four frames used to gauge the situation, readers will ultimately understand that the EU has low visibility as a prominent social actor and environmental actor. Its achievements and endeavors in these two spheres were not given due attention in Asia. Thus, Asians might lack awareness and knowledge of the union's other equally prominent roles.

All these findings, the book concluded, not only tells us how the EU is viewed through the eyes of Asians, but more importantly, these findings should be used by the combined countries in the union to increase its visibility as well as to enhance its image and identity internationally.

Not enough is known about the EU by Asians. Information about the union usually centers on its identity and role as an economic and political actor. Yet at the same time, this information is lopsided and limited. Such sketchy information often obscures its current and future multi-faceted roles both locally and globally. This book has proven us so. Considering that the EU is a global player not only economically and politically, but culturally as well as environmentally, this book will certainly provides the first step towards a deeper demand for information about the union.

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