The EU in the eyes of Asia: Motivation and methodology

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Published online: 11 September 2010
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...intersubjectivity turns out to be one of the key concepts for comprehending identity. The postmodern subject must be understood as constantly re-emerging anew from its intersection with the outside world and its Other... The postmodern subject is an embodied subject, but it is also historically, socially, and culturally defined (Shabot 2007, 57).

In his seminal work on the social theory of international politics, Alexander Wendt acknowledged Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionist framework in which social learning of international actors occurs when "actors come to see themselves as a reflection of how they think Others see or "appraise" them, in the "mirror" of Others' representations of the Self" (Mead 1934, cf. Wendt 1999, 327). Through history, Asia–Europe relation has been cast into a 'being-with-Other' mould—not only have the two been conceptualised as separate, but as fundamentally different and even opposing entities. As Chaban (2008, 138) noted, for Asia, the distinctive alterity of the European 'Other' comes with recognition of geographical distance, cultural disparities and racial differences. Moreover, historical legacies of colonial past and the recurrent threat of 'Western' cultural and civilisational domination split the two even further apart. For Europe, the idea of Asia's 'otherness' can be traced back to the ancient worlds of Greece and Rome—to the concept of 'Orient' (Said 1978). Europe's later explorations of China, Japan, Indonesia and Indochina sealed the European notion of the 'Oriental Other' in terms of exotic, opulent and mystical East (Foss and Lach 1991)—sometimes unknowable and mysterious (Radar 2007), sometimes irrational and despotic (Wilkinson 2003)—but always alien and different to Europe. These differences, proclaimed by various European discourses across centuries, have fuelled eurocentric and xenophobic attitudes inside the 'European Self' and spurred antagonistic reactions in Asia.

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So, is it “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” (Kipling, on line) ad infinitum? Or is there a hope that the dialogue between the two will take onboard a concept of “dialogism”, which, according to Mikhail Bakhtin (1986, 69), aims at producing “active responsive understanding”? Described as a “strategy for establishing productive inter-subjective relations between individuals, social groups and cultures” (Pereen 2007, 79), dialogism¹ “denotes an active, answerable interaction with alterity that imposes neither negation nor assimilation” (Ibid.). Finally, will the dialogism strategy help Europe and Asia form an “I-Thou” (Buber 1958) attitude towards themselves and each other—an attitude when the Self if turning towards the Other developing “the realizing function where the Other becomes the revered-in-itself” (Wood 1969, 37), rather than an “object of my projects” (Ibid.). This relationship is argued to exist in the spirit and mind of an ‘I’ with a “dimension of self-ecstatic mutuality where the self does not disappear in absorption but grows to own selfhood and authentic differentiation” (Ibid, 72).

This empirically based issue of *Asia Europe Journal* focusing on the perceptions of a modern European polity, the European Union, by present-day Asia adds a valid and unique perspective to the ongoing dialogue between the two continents. Similarly to Bakhtin, whose theory of dialogue “emphasized the power of discourse to increase understanding of multiple perspectives and create myriad possibilities” (New World Encyclopedia, online), we believe that an ongoing dialogue between Asia and Europe creates a new understanding of the modern world that demands change. The Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM), the largest inter-continental forum (now comprising 48 members²)—is one of the examples of an ongoing dialogue. Yet, it seems that the high aspirations for better mutual understanding of the first ASEM 1996 meeting remain only partial fulfilled, and ASEM has reached a critical juncture on how Europe and Asia view each other. Two recent developments have brought the need of better communication to the fore: firstly, the rapid enlargement of ASEM, in Beijing in 2008 and then in Brussels in 2010, has added six new Asian partners to the process; and secondly, the creation and development of the European Union’s European External Action Service and changing public diplomacy under the Lisbon Treaty. Thus, the ASEM dialogue is more complex, increasingly diverse and in need of renewed focus.

Academic context underlines the importance of studying perceptions, communication and stereotypes in the context of international relations in general and in Europe–Asia dialogue in particular:

Perceptions matter—because they are a basis for understanding and a foundation upon which actors make choices and decisions. Understanding the perceptions and perspectives of the “other” side can provide a basis for improved communication and give guidance on policy adjustments (Wetterqvist 2009, 16)

In the eyes of an Asian observer, despite the strategic importance of Asia and Europe to each other, more effective and efficient cooperation is flawed by the

¹ This concept is also defined as “the involuntary relations of responsiveness between utterances” (Pereen et al. 2007, 79)

² As of October 2010

“considerable differences in respect of culture, opinions, politics as well as misperception and ill-informed views of each other’s role in the international arena” (Duong 2008). For the EU, a sober account of its external perceptions is also of paramount importance. As noted by Carolyn Rhodes (1998, 6), “Paying attention to how the EU is viewed abroad helps us to evaluate whether gaps between expectations and realities have affected the ‘reach’ of EU influence.”

To address these concerns, a transnational team of researchers (led by the National Centre for Research on Europe (NCRE), University of Canterbury, New Zealand) has collected a comprehensive dataset on EU external perceptions from 18 locations in the Asia Pacific since 2003 (Holland et al. 2007; Chaban and Holland 2008; Chaban et al. 2009; for more publications, see www.euperceptions.canterbury.ac.nz). In every location, the project studied the media imagery of the EU in the national news discourses (print and television), as well as the perceptions of the EU among the general public and national stakeholders (political, business, civil society and media decision makers and policy makers). The Asia–Europe Foundation (ASEF) has been a collaborator in this project and supported the development of a multinational team of experienced and early-career EU scholars in Japan, South Korea, China, (including Hong Kong and Macau SARs), India, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines. This unique scope of inquiry—in terms of geography and expertise—resulted in an unprecedented ongoing comparative study of EU and ASEM imagery across space and time³ in one geopolitical region. Importantly, the original project has informed and inspired a new research collaboration—a ‘mirror perceptions’ project “Asia in the Eyes of the EU” (supported by ASEF, NCRE, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and eight European universities) which was launched in the second half of 2010. Finally, the project has served as a solid point of reference for scholars of EU perceptions around the globe for nearly a decade and has been instrumental in opening up new research avenues surrounding public diplomacy.

These evolutions and elements of the project are reflected in the composition of this issue. Six of the eight articles published here employ the empirical data from the perceptions project in their analysis. Reflecting the project’s stresses on a comparative approach, three articles in this volume are designed along comparative lines. Dr. Li Zhang of the University of Nottingham, UK, contrasts media and public opinion findings from China, Japan and South Korea in her paper “EU Perceptions in Northeast Asia: a cross-national comparative study of press coverage and citizen’s opinion”. Using media and public opinion datasets developed by the project, the author hypothesises and compares the extent to which the local media agenda and framing of the EU in these three countries, the shared interests between the EU and the respective country, as well as social and personal connections may influence citizens’ opinions on the EU and its bilateral relations with these three most important Northeast Asian countries.

³ The next stage of the project will add a longitudinal perspective to the study. In 2010–12, the project partners will revisit the perceptions of the post-Lisbon EU as an exporter of values and norms through ASEM in the eyes of Asia (study supported by the initiative of Lifelong Learning Programme—Jean Monnet Programme 2010).

Focusing on a different ASEM sub-region, Dr. Portela of Singapore Management University analyses “The Perception of the European Union in Southeast Asia”. Her analysis explores stakeholders’ perceptions on the EU in the five Southeast Asian countries of Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand. The author explores elite visions of European integration and the applicability of the European model in Southeast Asia, as well as the perceptions of external policies of the EU benefitting or disadvantaging third countries in the region. Professor Chan-Ka Chan of Hong Kong Baptist University presents his analysis “Images, Visibility and the Prospects of Soft Power of the EU in Asia: the case of China”. In it, he compares EU perceptions in ‘three Chinas’ (mainland and the two SARs) assessing the effectiveness of the EU’s action in forging a ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’ not only with the leaders but also with the people. This analysis uses the data gathered by the project in the course of public opinion surveys and ‘elite’ interviews in the three locations.

There are also three country-specific contributions to this issue that utilise the rich data the project has produced. Professor Sung-Hoon Park and his colleague Dr Sung-Won Yoon, both from Korea University, examine EU–Korean relations in this article “EU Perceptions through the FTA Lens”. With South Korea as the only Asian state which has successfully negotiated the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the EU, this analysis uniquely compares Korean experts’ perceptions of the negotiation process across the time using the data from two series of interviews (2006 and 2010). Professor Rajendra K. Jain and Shreya Pandey, both from Jawaharlal Nehru University, focus their analysis “The European Union in the Eyes of India” on the detailed, groundbreaking survey of the most prominent EU imagery found in the Indian press and among national stakeholders. With India being among the newest ASEM members, these systematic insights provide a solid platform for future studies of India’s role in the forum. The third country case study “Clutching at the Apron Strings?” by Dr Serena Kelly of the University of Canterbury elaborates an identity paradox: New Zealand’s long-standing and deeply entrenched affiliation with the UK on the one hand and its claimed ‘Asian’ status in ASEM on the other. The author argues that New Zealand’s growing Asian orientation, its existing Commonwealth ties and its prominent British heritage may positively influence events at ASEM (New Zealand joins the process in October 2010).

The final two articles in this Special Issue look forward to a new research project being developed by ASEF and inspired by the “EU Through the Eyes of Asia” methodology and findings. In his article, Professor Zhongqi Pan from Fudan University focuses on a major dichotomy that characterises EU relations with China, what he terms the “conceptual gap on sovereignty”. Unlike the preceding articles, all of which draw on the empirical evidence for the perceptions project, Professor Pan utilises data from more general global values surveys in an attempt to demonstrate the implications of two very different perspectives of sovereignty—the traditional Westphalian approach that continues to characterise the Chinese world view, and the postmodern integrationist approach that has come to represent the EU.

Building on this focus of competing conceptualisations between Europe and Asia, Dr. Sebastian Bersick of the National University of Ireland in Cork, outlines the agenda for a new “mirror perceptions project”. In his article, “Perceptions of Asia in Europe”, he formulates the premises for the ‘mirror’ project which aims at tracking

the existing landscape of perceptions towards Asia within the EU and seeks to contribute to deepen and enhance European–Asian understanding. The more ambiguous geographical as well as conceptual nature of “Asia” presents additional challenges as does the dominant relationship with China within EU perceptions.

In conclusion, the ongoing dialogue between Europe and Asia could be conceptualised both as a “back-to-forth discussion between two or more speakers” (Pereen 2007, 79) and an “effective means of ongoing communication rather than as a purposive attempt to reach some conclusion or to express some viewpoint(s)” (New World Encyclopedia, on line, referencing Martin Buber). We hope that either interpretation of the dialogue could be enriched by including a systematic empirical consideration of each other’s perceptions—an intangible subject with tangible real-life consequences.

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