

The EU through the Eyes Of Asia Media, Public and Elite Perceptions In China, Japan, Korea, Singapore And Thailand

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fifty years since the Treaty of Rome, the European Union (EU) continues to realise Jean Monnet's vision for a unified Europe. Spanning twenty-seven countries with a combined population of close to 500 million and a nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of €11.6 trillion, is the EU primarily a successful example of economic and political integration? Or is it also, and perhaps most of all, a community of values? According to European Commissioner Margot Wallström in her 2005 "Plan D" initiative, an obstacle between the EU and Europe's citizens is a lack of any "common narrative" about the nature of European integration. She noted that "the real problem in Europe is that there is no agreement or understanding about what Europe is for and where it is going". This absence of an EU consensus on the final goal of European integration – be it among policy-makers or ordinary citizens – has also created a confused and perplexing image for those outside the borders of the EU27. As a result, the EU's international role often appears ambiguous both within and outside the EU.

Misperception or ill-informed views of the EU's global role puts the EU at risk of being overlooked or undervalued by third countries with whom the EU is a significant partner. Similarly, low awareness of the EU exposes third countries to the risk of slipping under the EU's "radar". This publication presents the findings of an 18-month study that examined how the EU was presented in print and television media and the perceptions held by the general public and by key stakeholder elites of the EU in Asia. The study was undertaken in six locations in the region, namely, China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Thailand.

The findings reported here will help to develop a wider knowledge about the international perceptions of the EU. Certainly, the external image of the EU constitutes a fundamental component of an ongoing process of EU identity-building, linking the perception of "Others" and self-perception. The analysis in this publication provides scientifically-compelling feedback that can assist in policy formation and suggests recommendations to the EU, third countries and the media, contributing to more effective public diplomacy.

The Data and Research Design

The research design for this project incorporates three phases undertaken in each of the chosen research locations – China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Thailand. The first phase explored images in the media; the second phase involved a public opinion survey about attitudes towards the EU; while the third involved a series of interviews with political, economic and media elites. It is assumed that newspapers are still a major source, indeed *the* major source for forming political ideas and information and that television news is the most popular source of news for the general public worldwide. It can be debated whether the Internet will overtake these features eventually, requiring a different methodology in a few years time, but in 2006

for the cases examined, newspapers and television, and not the Internet, remain the dominant information medium for Asian civil society.

Media

The media database presented here concerns the daily analysis of 18 newspapers and one prime-time television evening news broadcast in each of the six locations for the period 1 January – 31 October 2006, the period of the Austrian and the Finnish EU presidencies (See Table 1). Any article where the phrase “European Union” or “EU” was used, or where the use of the term “Europe” clearly referred to the EU was included in the dataset, no matter how trivial the reference. This has produced a unique, detailed and comprehensive empirical dataset of media perceptions.

Table 1. Press and Television News Monitored 1 Jan – 31 Dec 2006

	Popular Press	Business Press	English Press	Television
China	<i>People’s Daily</i>	<i>International Finance News</i>	<i>China Daily</i>	CCTV
Hong Kong	<i>Oriental Daily</i>	<i>Hong Kong Economic Journal</i>	<i>South China Morning Post</i>	TVB Jade
Japan	<i>Yomiuri Shimbun</i>	<i>Nihon Keizai Shimbun</i>	<i>The Japan Times</i>	NHK News
Korea	<i>Chosun Daily</i>	<i>Maeil Business</i>	<i>Korea Herald</i>	KBS
Singapore	<i>Lienhe Zaobao</i>	<i>Business Times</i>	<i>Straits Times</i>	Channel 8
Thailand	<i>Thai Rath</i>	<i>The Manager</i>	<i>Bangkok Post</i>	iTV

Public Opinion

Public opinion surveys were conducted in November 2006 in each of the locations studied.¹ The surveys were conducted through online panels and administered in the mainstream local language (English was used in Singapore) and identical questions were asked (with local variations relating to media coverage where appropriate). A total of 23 questions were asked (both closed and open-ended) which allowed for quantifiable as well as qualitative analysis to be undertaken. The sample size was 2,400 (400 in each location) and stratified according to predetermined categories (age, gender, etc).

Elite Interviews

A total of 154 face-to-face interviews with political, economic, media and civil society elites were conducted during July-September 2007 in six relevant economic and political centres in Asia: Bangkok, Tokyo, Seoul, Singapore, Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong. Interviews were conducted as individual face-to-face semi-structured on-record interviews and lasted up to one hour duration. Anonymity was offered to all respondents and where sources are identified this was with the explicit permission of the interviewee. This approach has proven to be particularly effective for approaching “key informants” – as it

¹ The exception was mainland China where the survey was delayed to January 2007.

is more personal, flexible, respects privacy and status, and can generate greater openness and trust between interviewer and interviewee.

General Media Findings

Table 2 gives the overall figures for the number of news items that mentioned the EU during 2006 across all the media outlets monitored in the six locations. Given that the table represents 365 pages of coverage across four media outlets per location, the visibility of the EU was particularly modest.

Table 2. Overall Distribution of EU News Items across Media Outlets in the Six Locations

Countries	Television	Popular	English	Business	Total
China	148	689	595	547	1979
Hong Kong	16	746	455	953	2170
Japan*	n.a.	280	95	505	880
Singapore	16	708	1021	677	2422
Korea	36	359	196	372	963
Thailand	25	93	707	175	1000

*6 month sample

Within this context of limited coverage, several trends are apparent:

- The virtual absence of the EU on prime-time television news broadcasts.
- The comparatively high profile given to the EU in China/ Hong Kong.
- The comparatively low coverage given to the EU in Korea and Thailand.

Media news items were classified according to four perspectives: was the EU presented primarily as an **economic, political, social** or **environmental** actor? Table 3 provides the overall findings. While the EU was still predominantly described in news reports as an economic actor, the EU's international political role and its social policy were also given a significant profile.

Table 3. Overall Distribution of Frames across all Media Outlets

Countries	Political	Economic	Social	Environment	Total
China	821	852	378	27	2078
Hong Kong	519	1154	333	155	2161
Japan*	387	391	72	5	855
Singapore	956	1094	349	79	2478
Korea	213	482	181	57	933
Thailand	431	395	151	20	997
Total	3327	4368	1464	343	9502
	35%	46%	15%	4%	100%

Overall Country Findings: Media, Public and Elite Opinion

China

The influence of the news media on the images of the EU in Chinese society has resulted in economics and trade issues being prioritised both in the press and in public and elite opinion. However, the attention given to the EU was rather limited although typically positive in assessment. The findings reflect the EU's position as a "strategic partner" and as China's most important trading relationship. The most notable finding was that of all the Asian television primetime news bulletins, CCTV1 was the channel most likely to feature the EU and these representations were mainly of the EU as a political actor. Public opinion rated the EU as one of China's most important partners and generally saw this relationship in a positive light. While still favourable, elite opinion was more pragmatic about the EU from an economic perspective.

Roughly half of the media news items on the EU in Hong Kong were economic in nature. Similarly, perceptions among Hong Kong citizens and elites also prioritised the economic image of the EU and saw the larger Sino-EU relationship as having the most impact on Hong Kong-EU relations. There was a high degree of scepticism over the EU's international political role.

Korea

The very low level of media interest in the EU, and the related lack of general public appreciation, has created an unbalanced and generally superficial perception of the importance of the EU globally. Within this context, trade and economic issues (including a free trade agreement) were the leading topics in the Korean media, public and elite opinion, although the political involvement of the EU in North Korea was also noted and seen by many as an opportunity to extend diplomatic relations. The EU was also regarded as a benign international actor in contrast with the United States.

Japan

In contrast, for Japan, the EU was regarded both economically and politically as only moderately important compared with Japanese relations with the United States and China. Indeed a feeling of "indifference" (neutral in tone rather than negative) towards the EU was the most pronounced in Japan compared with the other Asian countries examined. Relations were regarded mainly as stable, albeit at a modest level.

Singapore

In general, there was a gap between the clear and growing importance of the EU as a trading partner for Singapore and the level of reporting. When reported, equal weight was given to both economic and political images of the EU in the Singaporean media, with views being positive or neutral in tone. However, the perception of the EU as a social actor was generally seen in negative terms. Public and elite opinion ranked the importance of the EU to Singapore relatively low.

Thailand

Television prime time news virtually ignored the EU, as did the main Thai language press. When mentioned, the EU was somewhat more likely to be seen as an international political actor than an economic one. Public opinion reflected this general lack of knowledge and a tendency to relate more to individual Member States than to the EU as

a single entity. Overall, while relations were perceived to be stable, the EU then tended to be viewed with suspicion by Thai elites.

Comparative Themes

- Generally, there is limited media coverage of the EU across all countries. This is particularly pronounced in the low level of television coverage.
- In terms of symbols and recognition the Euro has become emblematic of the EU, even though only 15 out of 27 Member States are part of the single currency.
- Predominantly the EU is presented in the media as a traditional economic actor, but a trend towards appreciating the multidimensionality of EU activities is emerging.
- There is consequently, a growing recognition of the EU's international political role "somewhere else in the world".
- The EU as an environmental and social regulator is also starting to be profiled.
- The ASEM process was largely irrelevant in the media and in public opinion.

Raising EU Visibility in Asia

1. Utilise the "recognition" of the Euro as a public diplomacy tool
2. Build on the "single voice" of the High Representative and External Action Service as representatives of the EU
3. Promote studies of European integration into Asian school curricula as well as develop EU studies degrees.
4. Enhance and focus media and information campaigns.
5. Were the EU to increase the expectations of outside countries of its global role then there must be corresponding EU capacity to deliver such expectations – politically, economically, environmentally and socially – otherwise raising the profile would be counter-productive.
6. A positive external perception of the EU's global role can have reinforcing effects upon the internal value placed on the integration process per se.

Why do "perceptions" matter? If persisting and inaccurate images of a foreign actor exist within a country, then it is less likely that a government will adopt appropriate policies, as choices will be made on ignorance or misperception, which may lead to serious policy mistakes.

Despite an emerging trend recognising the EU to be much more than just an economic international actor, overall, the EU is still punching below its weight in Asia, and public, elite and media perceptions are even lower than is justified in reality.

This publication presents the findings of the first two phases of the "EU through the Eyes of Asia", a major academic collaboration to measure the perceptions of the European Union (EU) in the Asian countries of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process. This study is conducted within the framework of the European Studies in Asia (ESiA) network.

ESiA was initiated by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) to stimulate European studies in the Asian region by providing a reliable platform for exchange and co-operation between European studies academics both in Asia and Europe. As an all-inclusive network, ESiA embraces all academics, institutions and networks in the field of European studies in Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) countries. It endeavours to strengthen existing academic links in Asia as well as facilitate the creation of new synergies within Asia as well as between Asia and Europe, through networking meetings, academic collaborations and the use of online tools. ESiA is a flagship initiative of the Asia-Europe Foundation under the framework of the ASEM Education Hub. <http://esia.asef.org>