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Asia in the Eyes of Europe: Perceptions and Potentials

Sebastian Bersick, Michael Bruter, Natalia Chaban, Sol Iglesias, Ronan Lenihan

Introduction

The “Asia in the Eyes of Europe” research project provides an interesting journey through the insights and understanding of European citizens and media of ‘Asia’. The study set off to gauge perceptions of Asia in order to offer a glimpse into this vast and diverse continent from a European perspective. The central idea behind the project focuses on the understanding that the complex and diverging images that public, elites and media have of a different part of the world can determine the context of interactions between peoples and countries, and that perceptions offer an important layer to policy-making decisions and have an impact on how Asia and Europe engage with one another. Based on the principle that the study of perceptions “is a decisive factor in determining the expectations of others,”1 the study aims to provide information on these expectations, map out what ‘Asia’ looks like from Europe and, ultimately, facilitate problem-solving capacity building within and between the EU and its Asian partners.

Many factors help to shape how perceptions are created, but when examining perceptions of international actors, across a wide geographic and cultural divide, some factors play a larger role than others. Inevitably, personal connections are the first-hand interactions that can shape meaningful and long-lasting perceptions of the ‘other’ region. These interactions can sometimes inspire further links and a need to educate oneself of another region or people. Yet, they also can trigger a “negating reaction or a rigid entrenchment of the self.”2 Both of these outcomes are very important to how Europeans develop their perceptions of Asia. Since many people in Europe may only have limited direct interaction with Asia, the mass media (news and entertainment) provide the most comprehensive means to understand how citizens in Europe perceive Asia. Within the media, a number of factors exist that further shape the images of Asia and its actors and thus influence European citizens. The country chapters thus crucially delved not only into the imagery of Asia existing among the European general public and presented by the leading European press and televisions newscasts, but also into the perceptions of media professionals offering valuable insights into an industry that is increasingly dominated by the bottom line and profit margins. Essentially, what ‘sells’ is what styles newspaper pages and television news bites.

Looking deeper into this idea of what ‘sells’ and how market rationales influence news coverage on Asia in Europe, we need to understand the wider media agenda. The interviews with leading news writers and information ‘gatekeepers’ attest that priority is given to news

that is framed locally (i.e. inside a particular European country) and is relevant to its domestic audience. This is backed up by the higher volume of ‘locally framed’ Asia-related news items in the media analysis findings. A newsmaker’s physical proximity to a story is commonly understood to shape the focus of the news content. Yet, international news was no different — often, consideration of the domestic loss or gain was the central criterion in news selection. The study has also shown that the largest amount of news referencing Asia and its regional organisations originated from domestic sources (including local European correspondents on the ground in Asia), as opposed to international wires. In particular, Asian news wires were neglected. The genre of international news reported through domestically ‘tinted lenses’ involves more than just a specific thematic focus of an article, but also the choices in the language, length of the coverage and the tone. In a given environment, the tone and the volume of news frame the importance of an actor. The media can therefore play a decisive role in shaping the public perception of international actors. Conceptualising the news media (print and broadcast) as a powerful instrument that helps to shape perceptions, the study of the news content and the media practices, coupled with the public opinion data, offers a solid in-depth insight into how the perceptions of Asia and its actors can be gauged in present-day Europe.

Finally, the mystery of public opinion is such that sometimes, the general public can hold significantly different images of a country or a region than what is painted in the mass media. In that sense, the results of our mass survey of Europeans’ perceptions of Asia are critical in that they reveal, at times, far more complex, subtle, or even more sophisticated connotations than some of the media ‘elites’ seem to believe.

The study results help to answer a number of crucial questions related to how Europeans perceive Asia and what actors (national and regional) constitute the regions in the European consciousness. In which context is Asia perceived as a unitary or a divided entity and, when divided, which countries are perceived as the dominant actors? In which global issues is Asia (and its actors) seen to play an important role? What do Asian regional bodies look like from a European perspective? Are they seen to play a significant role? Are they seen to have problem-solving capacity? Finally, is Asia perceived with positive or negative connotations, and what spontaneous images does the region evoke in Europeans’ minds? The following sections summarise the main findings of the project in three issue-specific areas: political, economic and socio-cultural images of Asia.

Political Images of Asia

As power shifts, from ‘the West’ to ‘the East’, the global world order is going through a transformation process towards a multipolar world. The emergence of developing economies has an unprecedented impact on the international political system and global governance structures and will continue to do so, for example through the G20,
BRICS\textsuperscript{4} and Growth\textsuperscript{5}. Characteristic of this fundamental shift is an ‘emerging Asia’. It is important that policy-makers in Europe, at both national and regional levels, are able to reflect the consequences of this on-going power shift and acknowledge the major role that Asian actors and dynamics will play in this multipolar world. The results of this study help to paint a picture of how Europe sees ‘Asia’s rise’ in global politics and identify how Europeans view the major players, while interpreting knowledge gaps for policy-makers to address.

Looking specifically at the media analysis, of the 2,770 news items collected from twenty-nine media outlets over a period of three months, 19.4\% (538 in total) of the news items framed Asia and its actors in political terms. Of those political affairs articles, 85.7\% (461 in total) reported on individual countries (both members of ASEM and non-ASEM)\textsuperscript{6} in Asia with China being the most frequently mentioned Asian political actor, featuring in 43\% of articles (232 in total). Arguably, this finding highlights a leading image of China as a dominant emerging actor within the Asian context, in this case as a political actor. Other visible ‘political field’ players are Japan, India, South Korea, yet none of them has enjoyed a similar level of media attention as China.

The interpretation of Asia through individual countries seems to show an overwhelming predominance of China at the expense of other Asian political actors, be they on the national, regional, inter-regional or global level. The volume of overall news citing Asian regional and inter-regional processes was remarkably low, with ASEAN featuring in a mere 1.5\% of news items and APEC in 1.2\%. The East Asian Summit (EAS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) were cited only occasionally. The volume of news on ASEM was also quite low (3.4\% of all news items) and will be discussed separately. The interviewed journalists and editors explained that the diversity and fragmentation of Asia makes it very difficult to portray a sense of political coherence or even that of a regional entity. A common argument among the media respondents was that countries within Asia do not have a regional identity and act out of national interests, which in turn influence the message, especially in political news. For example, a French media professional from Le Monde commented that “China never speaks about Asia, China speaks of China. India speaks of India. Only ASEAN countries speak of Asia…. We have an ‘Asia desk’, but the things we do on China, things we do on Southeast Asia and things we do on the Indian subcontinent are completely different”.\textsuperscript{7} This kind of sentiment is evident among media professionals across other European countries in our sample, where the common news focus is centred on the national context and a ‘regional Asia’ is less apparent given the diversity of the region. One common recommendation shared by the media professionals interviewed in the course of this study was that regional

\textsuperscript{4} Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.
\textsuperscript{5} BRICS plus Turkey, South Korea and Indonesia.
\textsuperscript{6} Non-ASEM references referred mostly to Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and North Korea.
\textsuperscript{7} Interview conducted with an editorial director at the daily newspaper, Le Monde. The interview took place in Paris.
entities (such as ASEAN) should improve their communication practices with European media. Two immediate suggestions were to create direct lines of communication and to organise initiatives such as exchanges or partnerships between media professionals, organisations and networks, in order to improve understanding and facilitate interconnections.

In terms of data gathered in both the public opinion surveys and the interviews with media elites, some relatively similar trends emerged. These help to shed light on European perceptions of the ‘emerging Asia’ and its importance to Europe, both in the present and in the future. Looking at the areas for co-operation with Asia, the public opinion survey results illustrate that European citizens see Asia’s increasing importance in the world from economic and cultural perspectives, but not as much from a political one. When asked about the most important areas for co-operation with Asia, trade emerged as the most significant factor with an average of 34.6% of all responses, a somewhat predictable finding given the current economic climate. The second most important issue was “environmental protection” (16.1%), while “human rights and democracy” (15.6%) and “security and anti-terrorism” (12.3%) also featured among the most popular choices. Interestingly, what is considered less important also provides information into the perceptions of Asia and its actors as well as into how respective countries should co-operate with Asia. Of these, “cultural co-operation”, “social welfare”, “energy and natural resources” and “development aid and assistance” scored very low and were deemed as the least important issues for engagement with Asia.

An analysis of the politically-framed news items referencing Asia revealed a number of most interesting discrepancies between the public views of significant political issues and the media coverage. Specifically, according to the public opinion survey, 16.1% of respondents viewed “environmental protection” as the most important issue for engagement with Asia. This was however not reflected in the news media analysis as only 3.5% of total news items (ninety-six in total) portrayed Asia and its actors under this thematic base. Arguably, this outlines a need to improve the scope and quality of media coverage of Asia and its actors — obviously, the environment is a salient matter for European citizens and is recognised as key to their states’ engagements with Asia on a political level.

Nonetheless, our analysis did discover numerous instances where the media imagery correlates positively with opinions expressed by the general public. For instance, media visibility of individual Asian countries as political actors corresponded to the public views on future importance for engagement with individual Asian partners. As displayed in Table 10.1, China (43.1%), Japan (25.5%), India (22.7%) and South Korea (22.1%) were the most cited Asian countries in the news items under the political frame.
Table 10.1. Most cited Asian countries in politically-framed news

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number of articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selected others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burma/Myanmar</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 538

In comparison, when asked to rank Asian countries from 1 to 10 (where 1 was ‘not important’, and 10 was ‘very important’), the public opinion respondents ranked China with an average of 7.4, followed by Japan (7.0), Russia (6.9), India (6.8), Australia (5.6) and Singapore (5.6) (Table 10.2).

Table 10.2. Future importance of Asian countries — European average

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Future Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selected others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=6,155

The rankings are reflective of political and economic power and, interestingly, the next ranked countries were South Korea (5.5) and Indonesia (5.3), both members of the G20 and ‘Growth8’ groupings, while Singapore (the highest ranked non-member of the G20) is a major economic player in Asia and has the highest GDP per capita in Asia.8 However,

perhaps even more interestingly is the top rank given to the USA (7.9), which was included to provide a valuable comparison. This shows that despite the shifts in the international political system, multi-polarity and the related importance of Asian state actors, Europeans still view the USA as holding a more important role for future engagement with their respective countries.

These findings were mirrored by the views on the future importance of selected regions, with the European wide average illustrating a similar trend towards North America as a region ranking higher than Asia (Table 10.3).

Table 10.3. Future Importance of regions — European average

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Average score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australasia/Oceania (Australia, New Zealand and Pacific islands)</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: N = 6,155*

In terms of the more spontaneous perceptions of Asia, respondents of the public opinion survey and media interviews were asked to list the first three words that came to mind when thinking of Asia. The answers categorised as political in nature made up an average of 10.5% across each country, which placed it far behind categories such as “people and population”, “geography” or “economy and trade”. This illustrates that political roles of Asia and its actors do not enter the European consciousness as frequently as other images of Asia related to a sense of exoticism, geographic scale and economic progression.

The political linkages between Asia and Europe were also tracked in the research, which looked specifically at the perception of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process, the primary high-level political dialogue between Asia and Europe. In delving into the perceptions of ASEM and its visibility, the project aimed to understand how the leading European media and public saw the political relations between Asia and Europe and whether ASEM made any kind of impression on the public. With regard to ASEM’s visibility in selected European news media, the three-month period of the research featured only 102 news items (just under 3.7% of the total articles) citing ASEM. Surprisingly, the

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9 Words such as “instability”, “democracy”, “human rights”, etc. made up the political category.
10 It is important to point out that sixty-nine news items appeared in the six Belgian media outlets analysed, most of which discussed the ASEM8 summit which was held in Brussels in October 2010, while the media analysis was conducted.
analysed UK media featured no news on ASEM, perhaps due to Prime Minister David Cameron's decision not to attend the ASEM8 summit in Brussels in 2010.

Looking at ASEM through the gaze of the public opinion and media interview respondents, we see a similar gap. The public opinion survey demonstrated the complete lack of public knowledge of ASEM, with only 5.7% of respondents claiming any familiarity with the process. However, when asked about the processes “necessity in principle” for relations with Asia, a large proportion of respondents (81.7%) answered positively. This mirrored the interviews with media professionals, where many journalists and editors claimed to have only peripheral knowledge on ASEM. While many agreed to its necessity, there was much criticism of ASEM’s communications and scepticism towards its outcomes. Summed up well by a German foreign correspondent, “Either I am too ignorant or ASEM needs to improve its ‘PR’ work…. But right now, from the top of my head, I have no idea what impact the ASEM process could possibly have.”

How do these findings contribute to the overall perceptions of the political relations between Asia and Europe held by European citizens and newsmakers? In principle, the process received a positive endorsement from both groups in our study, yet its major problem was visibility. This finding may highlight the task for political leaders (both in Europe and in Asia) to re-introduce the value of the ASEM process and to improve its visibility in order to invigorate public interest. This ‘communication deficit’ is not a secret — it has been a major blight on the ASEM process since it started in 1996 and has been the topic of a number of external reviews and consultative processes to find a way to boost ASEM visibility. Our analysis provided further evidence that there is a positive public support — in principle — of ASEM. However, as the results of the study also show, there is no drive in the media to capitalise on this positive preconception and to talk more about Asia-Europe affairs and the ASEM process in the news media.

One of the most striking findings from the project related to the political images of Asia was the visibility given to the other major global actors and political leaders, the USA in particular. US President Obama’s visit to Asia featured in the selected news media across all countries in our study. This was seen as a major news story referencing Asia. Moreover, it also featured in a number of visual representations of Asia (a means of newsmaking which arguably raises the visibility of a reported subject), with images of President Obama in India, Japan, South Korea and Pakistan, as well as pictures of him from his younger days in Indonesia. Many of the articles interpreted the visit as a meeting between a ‘great power’ and ‘emerging powers’, especially in the case of India and Indonesia, whereas the Japan and South Korea leg of the tour was framed in the context of the two summits — APEC and G20. In total, President Obama’s visit to Asia featured in 7.3% of all news items (202 pieces), an interesting statistic when considering the dearth of information on the ASEM summit in September 2010 (3.7%). This focus on President Obama is also in stark contrast

11 Interview conducted with a foreign correspondent of the national daily, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, in Beijing in March 2011.
with how Europeans view EU representatives. In total, EU political figures (Herman Van Rompuy, José Manuel Barroso, Catherine Ashton, Jean Claude Trichet, etc.) were cited in a total of ninety-five news items referencing Asia (3.4%), less than half of those that cited the US president. This is either an indication of the perceived lack of interest in EU politicians or of a perception that the EU’s relations with Asia are deemed less important than EU member states’ relations with Asia.

The political perceptions of the past few years have been driven by the economic reality, which is pushing the performing Asian economies (established and emerging) to the forefront in global political affairs. This economic reality plays a part in the reporting agenda of the news media as well. Moreover, specific Asian countries, and most notably China, have made tremendous effort to influence world news through their own press agencies and international broadcasting tools with, apparently, a certain success, which is echoed in their presence at the forefront of news features. A common complaint by European media respondents was the lack of resources to have correspondents on the ground across the region sourcing more in-depth and differentiated political news. The G20 players and the BRICS bloc have received substantial media attention and have entered into public perceptions of European citizens, but Asian regional dynamics remain mainly out of focus. Yet, a ‘rising China’ is one of the images of Asia that resonates across each of the research elements. In that sense, the notion of a ‘rising China’ equals that of a ‘rising Asia’ (the latter notion also includes other major Asian countries such as India, Japan and South Korea). Whereas these actors feature high in Europe’s cognitive outlook of Asia, the invisibility of Asian regional dynamics is striking in Europe’s mental map of Asia. This poses a serious challenge to policy-makers and their strategy formulation for Asia, which does not currently address the potential impact of a more integrated Asia.

An unexpected finding from the research is the relationship between the European perceptions of the USA in the context of Asia: President Obama and his visit to Asia featured highly in the selected European media and NAFTA (6.74) and APEC (6.03) were considered more important to Europe than ASEAN (6.0). Arguably, US-Asia relations are seen as vitally important to the future of European countries. Also, with Europe continuing to underestimate the actual and potential importance of Asian regional organisations and a deepening integration in Asia, Europeans continue to fall behind the USA in their policy

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12 A survey conducted by Transatlantic Trends comes to the conclusion that a majority of EU respondents (52%) thought that the USA was more important to their national interests than “the countries of Asia” (37%). Interestingly, on the other hand a majority of Americans said the countries of Asia (51%) were more important to their national interests than the countries of the European Union (38%). This survey included the United States, Turkey, and 12 EU countries: Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The Transatlantic Trends project relies exclusively on the annual survey of American and European public opinion. See http://www.gmfus.org/publications_/TT/TT2011_final_web.pdf (accessed May, 29 2012).
formulation towards Asia. This is evident in the recent momentum gained by the USA in joining the East Asian Summit and championing the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

**Economic Images of Asia**

In times of the global financial crisis, the most obvious images of Asia were of economic colouring. While many European economies have struggled since the global financial crisis began in 2008, most Asian economies have so far been sustaining high economic growth rates. With increased levels of capital flows into Asia and a slow pivoting of key economic factors driven by inter-regional consumption, Asia has become the epicentre of global economic growth.

This is reflected in the public opinion data across our European sample, with “trade” (34.6%) cited as the most important issue for co-operation with Asia. Of the countries deemed as the most important for trade co-operation, China received by far the most responses. Japan was in second place and other countries included Russia and India, but the three of them paled in comparison with China. These results allow a glimpse into the European perceptions of the shifting global economic reality. They also show that China is portrayed as the most significant actor within Asia, and that the country is seen as a rising global economic power eclipsing other major Asian powers in terms of visibility and importance to Europeans.

Keeping with the public opinion data, the spontaneous images of Asia that were collected resulted in a rich mix of findings that were broken up into two categories, descriptive and analytical. The descriptive category showed that economic issues dominate the European perception of Asia. On average, economic references were cited at least once by 25.7% of the respondents. Further, dominant descriptive references related to “social and cultural references”, “individual countries” and “geographic references”.

In the analytical categories, the picture was less homogeneous. A fairly common theme emerged as many of the cited Asia references focused on “Asia as a giant” and “Asia as an emerging force”, but references to heterogeneity as well as suffering were not far behind, and references to Asia as a civilisation were also highly visible. These patterns highlight a fascinating connotative perception by Europeans of ‘emerging Asia’ as an economic, demographic and a cultural ‘giant’ experiencing political and human sufferings (including problems of democracy, human rights, poverty and inequality) as its major shortcomings.

The media analysis element of the research further highlighted the dominant perception of Asia as an economic region. Similar to the public opinion findings, the media analysis revealed that the majority of the news items referencing Asia, at an average of 40.7%, were focused on the economic sphere. The analysis of these articles outlined dominant themes

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13 The average provided is of seven countries, as the information for Italy was not available at the time of analysis.
of business and finance, trade and the state of the economy, while deeper analysis of these news items revealed that news reports portray Asia as a “potential market”, as a “competitor” and a region characterised by “economic growth”. Much can be gathered from these representations to help to understand the dominant perceptions of Asia.

A key element to this study is understanding how Asia is constituted in the European gaze, and, as discussed above, a major feature of this question is outlining which kind of actors are associated with Asia. The results clearly show that Europe perceives Asian capacity for problem-solving as either absent or lying with individual state actors. In the case of economy-themed news, the dominant actor was undoubtedly China as it featured in 41.8% of news items. Other key economic partners were falling considerably behind as in the cases of Japan (14.6%), India (12.9%) and South Korea (11.3%). In delving deeper into the implications of this data, we are faced with representations of Asia and its actors that are reflective of the trend evidenced in the other research elements. China, as an ‘emerging economic power’, is helping to rebalance global economic power, and it is evident that selected European news media have reflected this when they referenced Asia.

Echoing the findings from the public opinion and media analyses, the media interviews explicated the dominant perception of a ‘rising Asia’ in terms of economic powers. The impact of the economic importance on the perceptions of the public and the media is expertly explained by the Asian correspondent for the Austrian daily, Die Presse, who stated “the more economically influential the country becomes, the stronger is the interest. That has definitely increased and I count myself lucky that I’m in China rather than in Latin America or in Africa.”14 This correlation between the degree of interest in a given country/region and the economic success of a country/region is a common trend noted by the media respondents. Arguably, it relates well to the perception of Asia playing an increasingly important role in the world. As a UK respondent put it, “I think it [Asia] is still rising, there is still a lot of work to be done here. This century is going to be the Asian century.”

The idea of an ‘Asian century’ further reinforces the perception of the major role that Asian state actors will play in the ongoing shift in the international political system. While the increasing global role of Asian actors is clear across the three elements of this research, the gulf in perception of the actual and the potential role played by Asian regional organisations and institutions displays a major knowledge gap that needs to be addressed by policy-makers. Europe’s expectations towards Asian regional problem-solving capacity are crucially negative and belittle Asian efforts towards regional integration. While this image of a ‘rising Asia’ exists and the most persistent perception of Asia is through an economic gaze, Asia is never perceived in a unified form, or acting towards common goals. Asia is seen through the individual countries that constitute the region and, as discussed above, predominantly through the actors of the most economic significance, such as China, and to a lesser degree, India, Japan and South Korea.

14 Interview was conducted with a foreign correspondent for the national daily, Die Presse, in Beijing in March 2011.
Asia of Peoples and Cultures

As mentioned at the beginning of this publication, conceptualisations of Asia are richly diverse and are shaped by a multitude of factors, whether geographical, human, cultural, economic or political. Findings from this study also outline how Europeans from a number of European countries frame Asia and its actors in terms of this cultural and people-focused view.

The key insights into how ‘Asia’ as a concept is constructed in the European citizens’ mind-set came from the open-ended question about spontaneous images of Asia. This question was designed to gather the spontaneous perceptions of Asia, be they positive or negative, in-depth or indifferent. Looking at the descriptive categories of our analysis dealing with aspects of people and culture, the most cited responses fell under the theme of “society, culture, religion”. This would include references to food, religion or culture (e.g. “Confucianism”, “orientalism”, “Buddhism”, or “exoticism”). Another visible category was the geographic references to Asia. These focused on Asia in terms of its vastness, and also with reference to its climate (“hot”) or the landscape (“beaches”). Finally, a common reference made by the respondents focused on the “people and population” of Asia. These views highlighted a vision of Asia through its large populations and diverse demographics. Again, a disparate perception of Asia emerges, equally valued for the rich and vast culture and traditions, as for its geographic expanse and populous demographics.

Turning now to the analytical categories of our analysis, the findings indicate the most common focus on Asian civilisations which describes Asia as an ‘imagined other’ as well as Europe’s counterpart. These references define Asia as an entity and link its image to tourism, as well as people, food or cultural characteristics. These are perceived as different from Europe thus defining Asia as ‘the other’ for Europe. The next most frequent category displays an interesting split in perceptions, as it references Asia as a heterogeneous or disparate entity. This finding links with the previous findings of Asia’s images in terms of political heterogeneity. It further emphasises the perceptions of Asia as a non-entity, defined by individual countries, which, in their turn, are seen to be constituted of fragmented parts. Other categories that appear to a lesser degree include: size (referring to Asia in terms of its vastness or its gigantism); misery (referring to Asia in terms of poverty, natural disasters, human rights or democratic violations, cheap labour, prostitution, etc.); and peril (referring to Asia as a threat due to its instability, its growing economic competitiveness, and other factors such as crime and pollution).

It seems that the image of Asia in the European public mind-set is that of a fragmented and vast cultural and geographic entity. At the same time, Asia is often seen as a rather instable, unbalanced and slightly dangerous economic and social entity. The use of clichés and stereotypes (both negative and positive) help to create an image of Asia as an ‘imagined other’ in the European mind-set.
However, the next ranked category, “Asia as a non-entity”, brings back an image of heterogeneity displaying Asia as a vast mix of disparate elements, not to mention the characteristic of size displaying an image of vastness, which contrasts with Europeans’ perceptions of their own continent. Another interesting aspect of the data is the negative connotations: “Asia as a peril” focuses on issues such as poverty, natural disasters, political instability, inequality, human rights issues and overpopulation. Each of these displays an understanding and, in a sense, empathy for the hardships endured by some Asian populations. On the other hand, the references to an Asian threat or peril espouse an image of fear caused by the unknown, insecurity over issues such as terrorism or immigration, and by the perceived ever-increasing political ambitions of China. Partly, the perception of threat could be considered as triggered by the fear of Asia overcoming Europe economically with common references to “competition”, “low wages” and “counterfeiting”. However, it is also likely that this threat is partly fuelled by the intuition that politics, economics, and society are organised in very different ways in much of Asia as compared to much of Europe, and the perception that the ‘West’ is increasingly unable to impose its own dominant conceptions of democracy, human rights, and social organisation as a universal goal. In short, Europe has got used to the rest of the world trying to emulate its model for the past 200 years, and it may feel threatening to face the perception that this time, it is Europe which is expected to adapt to the new modes of thinking and behaving.

Keeping with the public opinion data, the respondents were asked about their positive or negative feelings towards Asian people or people of Asian extraction. It is worth noting that notwithstanding the elements mentioned above, the responses were predominantly positive with 48% of the total, with the negative responses amounting to 6.6%, while an average 34.3% falling under the neutral tone. Interestingly, the UK, a country with a long colonial link to Asia and a large multi-generational Asian migrant population, posted the most negative responses (11.4% in the UK and 14.6 in Northern Ireland). The question shows that the average European respondent has a positive impression of Asian people and people of Asian extraction.

The view of how Asian people and cultures are reported in the media further emphasises the image of Asia as a disparate entity, rich in cultures but most certainly devoid of unity. In terms of volume of news, the socially themed news covered a whole host of issues such as culture, entertainment, health, lifestyle, migration, sport, tourism and others. Interestingly, the social affairs reportage was the second most visible after economic news (35.6% or 987 news items). A closer look into the social news depicts a microcosm of themes highlighting a multitude of issues and featuring different actors.

Of the 203 articles in our analysis (21% of socially-themed news), one in four featured the news related to China. Importantly, most of the visual images also featured China. Similar to the economic and political coverage, Japan, India and South Korea were also reported, but to a lesser extent. The most frequently reported were immigrants and celebrities (sportsmen, actors, artists or entertainers). The media portrayal of Asian people and cul-
tures was often reflecting the current issues of the day (e.g. many articles in our sample focused on the Pakistani cricket match-fixing scandal that broke in the autumn of 2010).

The representation of Asian people and culture through public opinion and media analysis offers a view of an Asia that is rich in diversity, unexplained and exotic, and constructed for the most part via clichés and stereotypes linked to food, religion and cultural references. Hard-to-forget negative images such as natural disasters, political chaos or human rights abuse are also featured. Whether we want it or not, these images are effectively generalised in people’s minds to an entire region. These clichés help to trace a unifying view of European perceptions on Asia and are further reinforced by the propensity to imagine Asia as a vast geographic entity overpopulated by people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

**Imagining others — a never-ending circle**

One of the things that our study has revealed is that European elites and European citizens hold and convey images of Asia that would undoubtedly surprise many Asians, in the same way that our team’s previous efforts had uncovered the fact that Asian elites and citizens hold and convey images of Europe and the EU that would shock (or sometimes depress!) many a European. At this stage, it is worth noting that as hinted throughout this volume, a part of Europeans’ images of Asia are directly constructed or modified in relation to their images of other parts of the world. Finally, it is equally clear that all of these perceptions are also affected by the image Europeans have of themselves. Every change in the political agenda, every change in the strategic or economic reality has the power to affect all at once the perceptions of all the other communities that surround our own. Thus, perceptions of Asia in Europe and of Europe and the EU in Asia are reflexive and also a part of a series of complementary and volatile perceptions that permanently affect one another.
Core Recommendations

Launch Asia-Europe Public Diplomacy Initiative

Compared to the relative high importance given to bilateral affairs, there is a low awareness in Europe on regional and multilateral Asian affairs. In view of this gap, the Asia-Europe Public Diplomacy Initiative should address the need to raise the profile of Asian affairs from two vantage points by simultaneously promoting Asian regional and multilateral affairs in Europe and respective European affairs in Asia. Part of the new initiative could be the launch of the “Asia Year” in the EU and the “EU Year” in Asia (timing of these could be possibly linked to the ASEM bi-annual summits). This would offer interested ASEM stakeholders an opportunity to promote their images and assets to Asian and European publics. The business sector could consider supporting relevant parts of the initiative. The Asia-Europe Business Forum, the Asia-Europe Peoples’ Forum and ASEF may become driving forces of the initiative being involved in its organization and operational implementation.

Facilitate Asia-Europe News Media Partnerships and Exchanges

The news media are the most important providers of Asia-related information to European audiences. News media are the leading shapers of European perceptions of Asia. Yet, the European public’s interest in and demand for Asia-related news is not met by the European newsmakers, especially in the case of European television news. We suggest establishing a net of inter-regional news media partnerships and exchanges in order to address this imbalance. Such partnerships would allow for forging closer working relationships between European and Asian news media professionals. This could lead, for instance, to more in-depth analyses of Asian affairs by European newsmakers and publication of news produced by Asian media partners in European news outlets.

The establishment of inter-regional media partnerships and exchanges would address two key obstacles in communicating modern Asia to European news audiences, namely the high cost of international news production and heavy dominance of European sources (domestic and regional) in Asia-related news. On the one hand, the partnerships and exchanges could help to reduce production costs as monetary constraints bode heavily on the quality and quantity of Asia coverage in Europe. On the other hand, the inclusion of Asian news sources would broaden the perspectives of Asia-related reportage which could possibly lead to a more comprehensive and diverse perception of Asia among the European news audiences and, ultimately, to a better understanding of the issues shaping Asia today. The initial stage of this initiative could involve the EU, ASEAN and interested ASEM stakeholders setting up an ASEM News Media Facilitation Fund, to support the establishment of the media partnerships and exchanges among a number of leading news outlets in Europe and Asia. In addition, ASEM organisers could consider more open formats for news media involvement during ASEM events. Correspondingly, ASEF should expand...
the number and scope of fora and opportunities for news media groups to meet and collaborate in an inter-regional framework, for instance back-to-back to ASEM events.

**Market a wider ‘Asia’**

European public perceptions and news media images of Asia are largely Sino-centric. We argue that an equation of Asia with China limits the Europeans’ awareness of a diverse present-day Asia and clouds the understanding of the complex internal dynamics of contemporary Asian affairs. In order to provide balance, Asian countries and regional organisations would need to become more proactive in raising their profiles in Europe. One of such trajectories could be communicating to Europeans the success stories of increasingly functional regional integration processes (e.g. ASEAN and ASEAN+3). This could be achieved through the marketing of the ASEAN Community and related efforts of region and identity building. Such a strategy should include the creation of strong regional symbols and the promotion of those easily recognisable symbols in Europe.

**Invest in Asia-Europe Knowledge Community**

The rising interest in, and public knowledge of, Asia and its actors in Europe opens up opportunities for ASEM members to proactively relate to the complex dynamics of Asian, European and Asia-Europe affairs. On a conceptual level, Asia and Europe need to share their epistemological strengths by linking and integrating the production and communication of knowledge. On a practical level, Asian and European stakeholders should embed their relations in a common, knowledge-based project, namely the Asia-Europe Knowledge Community. Here, the enlarging and strengthening of educational activities and research collaboration, as promoted by the ASEM Education Hub, the ASEM Education Secretariat and ASEF, on the primary, secondary and tertiary level of education is suggested to be the main focus. Investment in education and research is seen as the key to promote enhanced mutual understanding and development of the two regions’ peoples, which is a top priority in Asia-EU relations.