

11-1-2012

**Mark Beeson & Richard Stubbs (Eds.). Routledge Handbook of Asian Regionalism. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge. 2012.**

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## Recommended Citation

Weber, Torsten Ph.D. (2012) "Mark Beeson & Richard Stubbs (Eds.). Routledge Handbook of Asian Regionalism. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge. 2012.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol4/iss1/16>

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**Mark Beeson & Richard Stubbs (Eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Asian Regionalism*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge. 2012.**

Against the backdrop of shifting economic weight and hyped public discourse, scholars of Asia these days do not typically suffer from any symptoms of an inferiority complex. Only two lines into reading the introduction of the volume under review, we find the claim that Asia “is clearly the most dynamic and arguably the most important region in the world” (p. 1). One is tempted to ask what could possibly make any one world region more important than another and, more provocatively, whether “Asia” constitutes a region at all. Where does this region start? Where does it end? And would this “Asia” be homogeneous enough, in whichever way, to be meaningfully referred to as one region? It is a great merit of this handbook that its editors are, despite the self-aggrandizing opening line, well aware of the definitional pitfalls and discursive limitations of studying “Asian regionalism.” In fact, the introduction and conclusion by editors Mark Beeson and Richard Stubbs belong to the best essays of this handbook, as they critically assess the terminology and state-of-the field (introduction) and propose a balanced vision of the future of Asian regionalism (conclusion).

As Beeson and Stubbs concede in their introduction, regionalism in Asia is a process in the making; it is more of a political and intellectual project than a reality. Moreover, “many of its key aspects are highly contested” (p. 1). Most fundamentally, this contest concerns the geographical scope of “Asia” and the kind of regional integration “Asian Regionalism” denotes. As the cover of the book already suggests, “Asia” here refers to East Asia consisting of Northeast Asia (mainly PR China, Japan, and South Korea) and Southeast Asia (mainly ASEAN). In other words: ASEAN plus Three. There are only brief references to Taiwan, North Korea, Mongolia, and India and none to former Soviet republics, Sri Lanka, or Western Asia. This geographic focus also informs the editors’ definition of “region,” which denotes the intended result of a state-led project and “a conscious, coherent and top-down policy” (p. 1), which they call regionalism. According to Beeson and Stubbs, Asian regionalism is different from other regionalisms. In their view, seven material and ideational characteristics distinguish the “Asian way of regionalism” from European or American regionalism; among them are “commitment to sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference” and “attention to performance or output legitimacy,” which both contribute to a preference for cooperation over integration. The subsequent thirty-three chapters succinctly explain the state of affairs (and mostly the state of research, too) of a wide range of topics related to Asian regionalism as defined above. Subdivided into five sections, the handbook addresses theoretical and conceptual issues of regionalism and Asia (Part I); economic, political, and strategic matters such as financial cooperation, development, and regional leadership (Parts II-IV); and different regionalist organisations such as ASEAN and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Part V).

One of the greatest merits of the handbook is not only its coverage of all crucial issues but also its inclusion of topics that are usually side-lined in IR-focused works on regionalism. For example, it is of great value that the reader finds a historical contextualisation of China’s role in the region (David Kang). Additionally, in order to understand today’s rhetoric of regionalism discourse in Asia and the difficulties of regional integration processes in a war-traumatized and essentially nationalized political sphere, it is also praiseworthy that memory, historiography, and identity are included for analysis. Peter Preston’s chapter on “war, memory and regional identity” provides a macro-historical outline of interlinks between East Asia, Europe, and the US and explains why nationalism is still a predominant and positively viewed factor in political discourse and reality in East Asia today. It is problematic, however, that only in passing does he mention the prevailing controversies

over history and historical consciousness that continue to challenge cooperation in East Asia (e.g. territorial claims, naming disputes, war compensation, questions of guilt and apologies, history textbooks, etc.). There is no mention at all of the various activities of civil society groups to overcome these “history problems.”<sup>1</sup> John M. Hobson’s proposition of a “non-Eurocentric global history of Asia” places Asia (specifically China, India, and Japan) in a macro-historical economic context in which Asia was the driving force of trade globalization, which eventually facilitated the intermediary rise of the West. Hobson is less concerned with regionalism than the growing relevance of Asia *in toto*, which he calls a “return to historical normalcy” (p. 49). His positive evaluation of the “voluntary” Sinocentric tribute system appears at times too apologetic and is indirectly refuted in the following chapter by David Kang, who compellingly demonstrates that early modern international relations in East Asia were “hegemonic, unipolar and hierarchic” (p. 72). Regarding economic data, Hobson’s suggestions are convincing, but as far as economic systems (e.g. capitalism) and socio-political systems (e.g. democracy, nation) are concerned, it cannot be denied that the legacy of the Western world’s historical interlude as the dominant global power (although relatively brief compared to the “period of Oriental globalization”) appears to have left rather lasting marks on Asian and global history. The relevance of this excursus for understanding the past, present, and future of Asian regionalism remains obscure. A historical contextualization of efforts at Asian cooperation and integration from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards—which were rife with constraints (both in theory and in practice) similar to those complicating today’s regionalist projects—would have been more enlightening.<sup>2</sup>

Other particularly noteworthy and important contributions for understanding the multi-dimensional character of regionalist activities in Asia focus on semi-official or civil society activities. Helen E. S. Nesadurai’s chapter on the ASEAN People’s Forum (APF) and Howard Dick’s contribution on corruption are important to understand facets that are usually not immediately associated with regionalism. Nesadurai’s study of the ASEAN People’s Forum highlights an alternative form of regionalism, namely regional civil society activism, known as “regionalism from below.” Nesadurai examines the institutionalized character of fora such as the APF and its predecessor, the ASEAN People’s Assembly (2000-2009). Because official government representatives participate in such meetings, the meetings facilitate not only horizontal debate among non-elites of different Asian countries but also vertical exchanges between political leaders and citizens. Given its restraints and resistance on the official level, it may be too optimistic to predict that these debates could develop into a sort of “people-centred” or “participatory regionalism.” Nesadurai concludes that they are nevertheless significant as “part of a growing Asian-wide transnational web of networks and people’s forums through which solidarity is being forged amongst civil society actors, and through which alternative regional projects are being articulated across Asia” (p. 175).

One predictable focus of discussions of Asian regionalism is the role of China. Min Ye argues that China’s rise will not only greatly impact regional (and global) politics, but also that the rise of China is a result of regional economic integration. For example, China’s shares of trade and investment in East Asia have been at least three times higher than those of Japan and Korea combined. According to Ye, while “market forces have integrated China into East Asia since 1978” (p. 252), China’s participation in regional frameworks was hesitant at best. However, the “domestic political crisis” of 1989, coinciding with the end of the Cold War, the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, and the 2005 Sino-Japanese and Sino-

<sup>1</sup> On this aspect see Tessa Morris-Suzuki et al. (ed.), *East Asia Beyond the History Wars: Confronting the Ghosts of Conflict*. London and New York: Routledge, 2012 (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> See Sven Saaler and Christopher W.A. Szpilman (ed.), *Pan-Asianism: a documentary history*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011 (2 volumes).

Taiwanese crises have gradually engaged China more closely with its Asian neighbors. In particular, Ye emphasizes how the PRC changed its attitude from that of a “passive participant” to that of an active leader in multilateral regionalism after 1997, with active roles in ASEAN plus Three, the Chiang Mai Agreement, the promotion of SCO, and the hosting of the Boao Forum for Asia. By the late 2000s, the goal of a “harmonious Asia” (hexie Yazhou) had been incorporated into the official diplomatic goal of a “harmonious world” (hexie shijie). Ye stresses that China’s approach to regionalism is highly reflective of its domestic political priorities, a reminder that is important also regarding regionalist discourse and practice of other countries in Asia. Christopher Dent supplements the analysis of China’s role by characterizing the quest for leadership in East Asia between China and Japan as a contest to determine who plays the role of “the most significant ‘regional leader actor’ . . . in East Asia” (p. 263). Dent claims that “each nation has championed its own vision and project of East Asia community-building” (p. 264), unfortunately without providing much detail on their contents and differences. Due to the tense bilateral relationship between the two countries, Dent argues, we should not expect that “China and Japan could agree to any kind of co-leadership arrangement” (p. 264). Dent concludes that it is unlikely China and Japan will become a joint motor of regional community-building as France and Germany have done in Europe. Yet he sees potential for Sino-Japanese regional co-leadership growing out of bilateral collaboration on some less controversial issues like energy and environment.

In their conclusion, Beeson and Stubbs take a similarly ambivalent stance towards predicting the consequences of China’s rise for international relations within Asia and between Asia and the rest of the world.. They say that while some think China’s role may lead to an inevitable conflict within the region and/or between East and West, at the same time, as a part of China’s rise, we witness growing interdependence of all nations in a globalized world due to common economic interests and the consolidation of cooperative mechanisms. The institutionalization of ASEAN plus Three, together with increasing transnational linkages may help not only to deconstruct perceptions of China as a threat but also to balance its real impact on political, economic, strategic, and social practices. Most significantly, perhaps, the question whether Asian regionalism has achieved anything at all seems less relevant than the future perspective: what will Asian regionalism achieve in the next decades? How will it change the lives of billions of people living in East Asia? How will it affect global politics? These questions already explain why Asian regionalism matters. As the editors rightly state, “whatever happens in East Asia in the future will profoundly influence the rest of the world” (p. 421). Therefore, “‘getting Asia right’ is both a theoretical and a policy challenge” (p. 421). Readers of this volume will certainly be well equipped to “get Asia right” by understanding processes of cooperation in East Asia in a highly informed and critical way. Among the very few weaknesses of the book is its heavy reliance on scholarship in the English language, which not only excludes many important works on Asian regionalism in other Western languages<sup>3</sup> but also gives a relatively weak voice to the region that it studies.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Christian Taillard (ed.), *Intégrations régionales en Asie orientale*, Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2004 and Philippe Pelletier (ed.), *Identités territoriales en Asie orientale*, Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2004.