

# Asia in the eye of Europe

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Michael De Leener



- 12 interviewees, scattered among the most important Francophone Belgian Media
- Always aimed for the highest in rank, but often refused or redirected

### WHO

- 2 Journalist of international service of RTBF (1 radio, 1 television)
- 2 at the Belgian press agency Belga (both Chief News)
- 2 at the paper Le Soir (1 assistant editor in Chief, 1 journalist at international service)
- 2 at the paper La Libre Belgique (both journalists international service)
- 2 at the economic magazine trends/tendances (1 assistant director, 1 journalist)
- Assistant editor in chief at Le Vif (generalist, qualitative magazine)
- Director from the qualitative political-economic magazine Geomoney

## Organization of Asia coverage

- Belga, Tendances: Very strongly focussed on Belgian news
  - No organization of Asia coverage
  - Asia needs to intervene in core business
- RTBF, Le Soir, La Libre Belgique, Le Vif:
  - Still strongly focussed on Belgium
  - But with independent international service
  - Belgian interference is preferred, but is not imperative
  - Current events mostly guide the coverage of international news
- Problems:
  - Belgian market is very small
  - and percentage of international news in total news coverage is pretty small.
  - Asia is not the priority of international news
  - leads to understaffed international services and disappointing coverage of Asia



# Research and Proactivity

- General tendency: very little proactivity concerning Asia, and thus very little research
- Newspapers and magazines:
  - Occasionally proactive
    - For example: - Story about the route of Afghan Heroine in Belgium
    - Articles about political and societal situation in China because of The Olympic games in Beijing
    - Article about the situation of Women in Hong Kong
- TV, Radio: Never proactive in Asia
- Problems:
  - Understaffed services, Lack of financial means, Lack of space
  - Journalists of international service often say they do not cover Asia the way they would like to cover asia



## Budget allocation

- Le Soir, La Libre Belgique, RTBF, Le Vif:
  - One budget for entire international service
  - current events determine how the money of the redaction is spent
  - In case of major events experts will be consulted, but not hired.
- Belga, Geomoney, Tendances
  - No organization of Asia coverage, no organisation of budget for Asia

## Sources

- Most important source: Agence France Press
- Freelance journalists abroad
- Always European sources, never Asian

## News Values

- In General:
  - belgian interests in a country
  - hot topic/current events
  - humanitarian angle / accessible topic for the crowd
  - original, surprising topic
  - Number of victims VS distance
- Belga, Tendances
  - intervene within core business
- Vif, geomoney
  - economic and political topics that are important to understand how the world works



## Editorial approach

- Officially formulated policy
  - Link with Belgium, attractive point of view...
- Bilateral or regional?
  - Hard to consider Asia as one region
  - Regions within Asia are often considered as abstract concepts
  - Discussions or articles are almost always about one country in particular
  - bilateral



## How difficult is it to sell an Asia-related story?

- Very diverging answers:
  - Le Vif: not harder than any other international topic
  - Tendances, Geomoney, Belga: Easy if Asia intervenes in our core business
  - Le Soir, RTBF, La Libre Belgique: Very difficult because of great distance and lack of knowledge
    - Philippe Lallemand (Le Soir) “It is easy to sell cliché’s, but it’s difficult to sell nuance”
    - [Quote](#) Journalist from Le Soir
  - La Libre Belgique: easier than before because of openminded editor in chief that welcomes articles that differ from general topicality



- *“Yes. People don’t have anything that relates them to Asia; what’s difficult to sell is nuance. [...] If you want to make a case about the opposition in Burma; the political opposition in Burma and you don’t say that you’re going to talk about Aung San Suu Kyi... but you will talk about the political opposition. The people above me will say “what kind of an article is this?”. We tend to work with cliché’s a lot, and it’s easy to sell those. But if you want to talk about another subject, if you want to talk about India as a nuclear power for example, which is a big subject, but people don’t have a starting point. There’s nothing that allows them to say “ow right, I’ve read something about this, I know something about this”. And that’s what makes it complicated. If I would have to sell an article about the populism of Hun Sen in Cambodia tomorrow, then I’ve got a problem. This is hard. It would be interesting, but it’s hard.”*

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## Geographic focus

- Current international geographic focus
  - Europe, United States, Former colonies (Congo, Rwanda), North Africa, Afghanistan
  - Asia is never a priority
- Expectations for the future
  - Awareness of mechanism at work:
    - growing importance of Asia
    - Links between Belgium and Asia are multiplying
    - Asia will inevitably intervene more in core business of media outlets
  - Nevertheless
    - No sudden turn towards Asia is expected
    - Asia will not become the priority of foreign reporting



If Asian regional bodies and governments were proactive in disseminating news about themselves, would your outlet be interested in considering such news?

- Not at all:
  - Belga: simply not their core business
  - RTBF: - No space in news broadcasts
    - Already too much information
    - Too official
    - No story behind it
    - Not attractive to the reader
- Maybe
  - La Libre Belgique, Le Soir, Le Vif, Tendances
    - Probably will look at it
    - But:
      - Will not use it very often (Same reasons RTBF)
      - with mistrust towards content of information



If Asian regional bodies and governments were proactive in disseminating news about themselves, would your outlet be interested in considering such news?

- Yes: Geomoney: Fits perfectly in their core business
- Constructive critique:
  - Journalist La Libre Belgique: *“What might be interesting is when these institutions organize press conferences and fill their rooms with journalists. Then they can ask questions and try to get hold on some specific information. Another interesting experience I had was that I was once invited by the Asia Europe Foundation to come to them and attend a meeting with different European and Asian journalists. These kinds of events are interesting because you get to meet Asian journalists; you get to make contact with the people of ASEF. The European Union does this very good as well, and maybe if ASEAN or ASEAN +3 or APEC would organize these kinds of events then the participation coming from Europe could grow.”*



If Asian regional bodies and governments were proactive in disseminating news about themselves, would your outlet be interested in considering such news?

- Journalist le Soir: *“Because we discovered that when ASEAN intervened for example in the Burma-case, we did not dispose of real time information. We wanted to have information like in the European Union or NATO. This kind of fluid information. I see NATO, not because they are in Brussels, we don’t go to Evere to get information; we follow NATO through the web. We followed the war in Libya through NATO’s press releases on the internet. If ASEAN would give us the same kind of information NATO or the EU does, this would be extremely interesting.. And so to me, indeed, if we would dispose of such clear lines of communication with certain Asian actors, this would be very interesting.”*





# Elites' Personal perceptions on Asia

## Is Asia a big power? In which field?

- Economic power?
  - Unanimously yes
  - Respondents refer mainly to China, India and Japan
- Military power?
  - 7 out of 12 positive
  - Mainly referring to China and in lesser amount to India
- Demographic power?
  - 3 out of 12 positive
- Diplomatic power?
  - 3 out of 12 positive



## Is Asia a leader in international politics?

- 3 out of 12 positive
  - Economic power used in the field of politics
  - Growing importance in international decisionmaking process
  - Presence of some Asian countries in other regions
- 5 out of twelve say not yet
  - Power to block things, but not to set the agenda
  - China as a regional power, but not yet as a global power
- 4 say frankly no



## • Asia as a negative power?

- Dangers of:
  - Growing inequality
  - Uncontrolled demographic growth
  - Growing number of nuclear powers
  - Military countermovements against China's rise
  - Huge environmental problems
  - Plus remaining problems of underdevelopment, poverty, lack of democracy and human rights
- Problem:
  - Asia cannot be described as one power.
  - Asia does contain a couple of powerful countries



# Issues in Belgium-Asia relationship that have the most impact on Belgium

- Economy
  - Trade
    - Consumption products (“Made In China”)
    - Petroleum (Middle East)
    - Economic partnerships (Japan, South Korea)
  - European investments in Asia and the other way around
- The war in Afghanistan
- Human rights
- Crime (intellectual property, counterfactuals)
- Terrorism
- Average importance of Asia to Belgium in the present: 3.25
- Average importance of Asia to Belgium in the future: 4.17



# Knowledge of and interest in ASEM

- 6 Out of twelve admit not having followed the meeting up close
  - 7 out of twelve do not see an impact of ASEM on Belgium
- Both knowledge of and interest in ASEM were very low

Why?

- Not interesting enough to write about it
  - Too official
  - Little tangible results
  - Does not affect the man in the street
- Too much weaknesses to have a lot of impact:
  - Both sides are too divided
  - Negotiations do not go enough into detail
  - A lot of efforts for very little results (Bling-Bling event)
  - More a discussion forum than an organism that takes specific decisions



# Knowledge of and interest in ASEM

- Constructive critique:

- Chief news Belga *“I think that connections are being made and that certain contacts are established, I’m sure of that. But unfortunately this is not enough publicized. They don’t talk about this enough, we don’t know the consequences, the contracts that are being signed between different companies, between different diplomats, politics. We don’t see enough of this, they say it, but we don’t see it. What I’m saying is that I’m sure of the fact that important things happen there, otherwise it wouldn’t even take place, but I think that there is a lack of communication to materialise this.”*

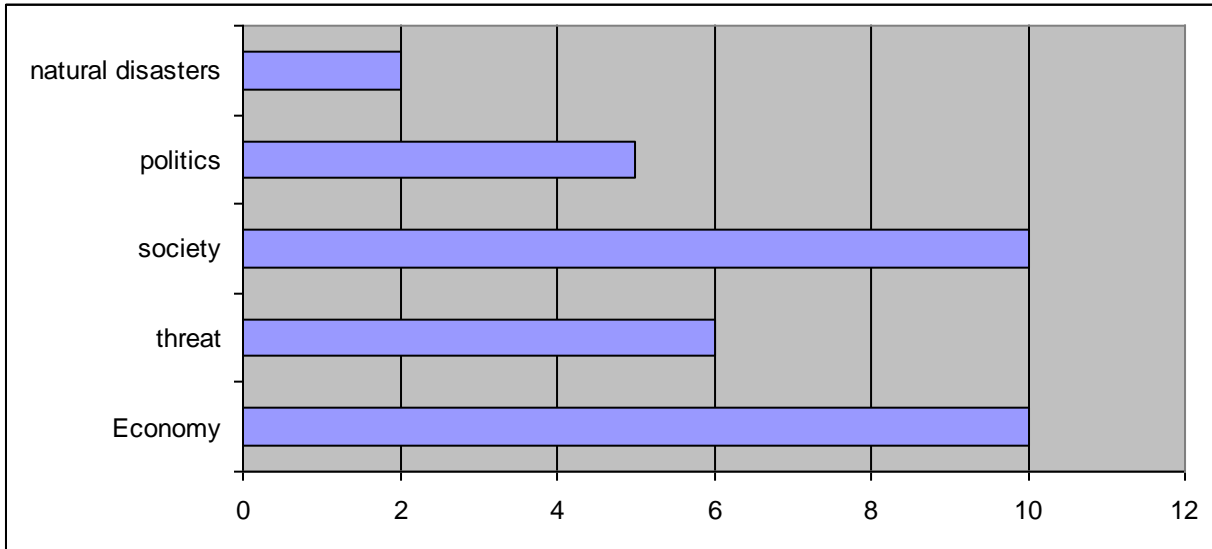
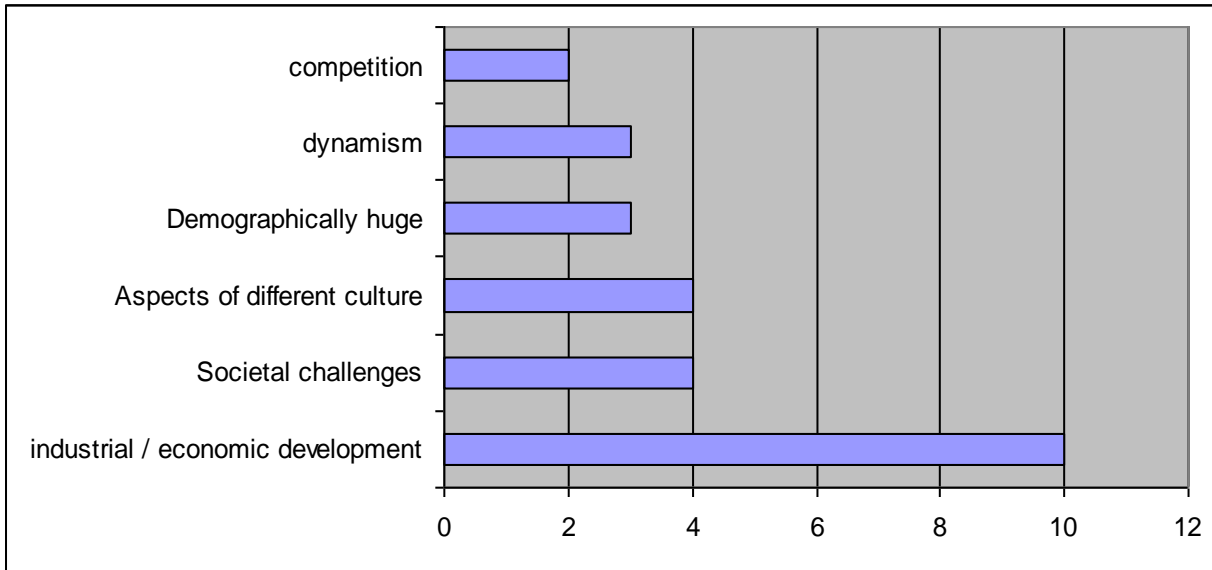


# Impact of ASEM on Belgium

- Contacts are being made
- Rise of Asian investments in Europe
- ASEM as an accelerator of existing processes
- Economic deals?
- Free Trade Agreement with South Korea
- “Things that happen behind the scenes”
- Traffic jams



# Images of Asia



## Some Conclusions

- Problem of small Belgian market is hard to overcome.
- For historical reasons Asia will not easily become a priority of foreign reporting in Belgium. Might be different for the Netherlands or Great Britain
- Hard to consider Asia as one region
- China dominates people's image of Asia



## Some Conclusions

- Mixed feelings of Belgian media elite towards Asia:
  - Fear
    - Of economic competition (reduction of social welfare in Europe)
    - Of threatening political situations (nuclear weapons, china's rise)
    - Of damage to the environment
    - Of lack of respect for Human rights
  - Opportunities
    - Economy, investments, consumption goods...
  - Mystery (the Unknown)



## Suggestions

- Belgian media: Try to expand the Asia-knowledge of the Belgian audience, do not stick to clichés
- ASEF: keep on playing a mediating role between Asia and Europe! Certainly on the level of science and journalism
- ASEAN: create reliable (NATO-like?) system of communication
- ASEM: serious image problem
- Asia in the Eyes of Europe: Biggest weakness = Asia cannot be considered as one entity





**Thank you for your attention**