
Why are there no international institutions in Asia like those found in Western regions? Since the “new wave of regionalism” spread over the region in the 1990s, a number of scholars have addressed this question. Realists attribute the lack of them to a byproduct of US hegemony, liberalists think it is a result of the nation’s rational calculation and constructivists argue that the identity dissonance between the US and its Asian allies have prevented it. Whose Ideas Matter, written by an eminent scholar on Asian regionalism, develops the constructivist view by focusing on the norms of local actors and sheds new light on the study of regionalism in Asia.

The argument of the book is fairly clear. Ideas and/or norms embedded in regions are not imposed by external powers but are generated from within the region. Whether an external idea is accepted depends on local agents, who have a “cognitive prior.” Local leaders initially assess outside ideas in terms of their suitability for local reconstruction, and normative change occurs only when those foreign ideas successfully fuse with local ones. This dynamic process is called “constitutive localization.” Acharya stresses that the reason that Asian regionalism remains under-institutionalized and non-legalized cannot be explained without exploring the norms and behaviours of those local agents. Thus, whereas traditional constructivists’ views are generally top down, this book employs a bottom-up approach.

As a corollary to the above arguments, this book pays special attention to local historical and institutional contexts, particularly, South Asia in the 1950s and Southeast Asia in the 1990s. In chapters 3 and 4, the book deals with major Asian regional conferences held in the early postwar period such as the Bandung Conference. The author scrutinizes the historical courses of both acceptance of non-intervention and denial of collective defense in the region, drawing on previously unavailable or unused original documents from regional archives and sources. While the former norm was not only accepted but reformulated and extended by new nationalist leaders, the latter was not localized because the local agents had a strong norm of both anti-colonialism and anti-power politics and rejected great power spheres of influence. Acharya also touches upon the post-Bandung period. In contrast to ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), which consists of only developing states in Southeast Asia, regional forums under the leadership of...
Japan, such as ASPAC (Asian and Pacific Council) and Ministerial Conference on Economic Development in Southeast Asia (MCEDSEA), failed because they lacked regional legitimacy. Although the causal connection is not clear to me, he argues that the norm of non-intervention localized in South Asia in the 1950s influenced the establishment of ASEAN, and subsequently the so-called ASEAN way.

In chapter 5, he examines a situation in the 1990s where local agents were faced with two sets of norms: common security and collective intervention. The concept of common security, which originated in Cold War Europe, was received cautiously by ASEAN and reframed as cooperative security, finally becoming the core principal of ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum). By contrast, the norm of collective intervention, such as the humanitarian intervention in Burma, did not succeed in attracting majority support and will not be localized at least in the immediate future. Finally, in chapter 6, Acharya extends the localization framework to the economic arena and other parts of the world—Latin America and Africa—and confirms the relevance of his argument, albeit some may criticize him for selecting cases arbitrarily.

International politics in Asia has been studied mainly by Western scholars. As a result, current IR theory remains heavily Eurocentric or “Americanocentric.” The author repeatedly warns against applying Eurocentric criteria blindly to study Asian regionalism. What he tries to do in this book is “bring Asia in” to the theory of international relations. He does not employ simple deduction or induction. Rather, his approach can be called abduction; using a dialectical combination of theory and empirical findings, moving back and forth between the two to produce an appropriate account, which makes this book quite convincing. However, as Asian perspectives become clearer in the future, paradoxically there is a possibility that his argument could become less cogent. That is, power politics inside the region or the functional imperative of the local leaders might be found to be stronger factors explaining the institutional trajectory and outcomes of Asian regionalism. Much remains to be studied from this point of view.

As Acharya emphasizes the dynamic process of international relations as a constructivist, this is an ongoing, unfinished project both academically and practically. I am looking forward to more studies on Asian views both from Asia and abroad. This book is definitely one of the forerunners.

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