

Australia in Southeast Asia
Regionalisation and Democracy
by Erik Paul

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Foreword

Australia is the pioneer of European Asianisation. Over the next decades the Europeans in Europe will need to follow the example of their kin in Australia: cultivate their relations with Asians, develop a profound knowledge of Asian cultures, customs, economies and politics, cope with migration in both directions, abandon the flawed idea of a divide between a unique Europe and a greatly different Asia, and become a little Asian themselves. With increased interaction, Asians and Europeans will discover how they together constitute an interlocking Euro-Asian mosaic where the differences within Asia are at least as big as those between Europe and any of Asia's parts. Euro-Asian interaction, hopefully stimulated by the ASEM process that started in 1996 and continues with the London summit of April 1998, may become one of the axes of global politics. Eurasian interaction does not, however, need to be interpreted in old-fashioned geographical terms. Although the Eurasian continent is clearly one land mass, this is hardly the point; such a consideration would moreover exclude Australia. At a time when human beings communicate through air transport and cyberspace, geographical barriers such as seas and mountains no longer really count.

The prospect of expanding the (Western) European Union into Central and Eastern Europe and the need to reconstruct the economies and social institutions of the former communist states represent big challenges for Europeans, but also involve

a danger that Europeans may turn further inward and forget the need to Asianize. Such a tendency could be reinforced by xenophobic fears of immigration and also by erroneous ideas about the financial crisis that struck East and Southeast Asia in 1997 and 1998. In reality this crisis has shown even more clearly than before the need for responsible global cooperation in providing frameworks for sustainable development. And such global cooperation can itself only be sustainable if the peoples of the old continents approach each other and establish a varied, global culture.

In order to play a constructive role in that global culture Europeans need to develop what the Australians call 'Asian literacy'. This does not just mean to promote the teaching of the major Asian languages such as Chinese, Indonesian, Hindi, Arabic and Japanese, but also to develop a broad cultural knowledge about Asian traditions. It will be necessary for any cultivated European to know about the history, customs, literature and art of the major Asian civilizations. In a truly Asianized Europe such knowledge will no longer be the privilege of a specialized few. Asian literacy will be part of the general European curriculum.

One of the challenges is also to cope with different political forms, to develop a Euro-Asian dialogue concerning 'democracy', redefine what the basic requirements for a democratic system are, and how democratic institutional forms can be developed creatively to suit each nation's needs. This is difficult. The whole process of Asianization is difficult, because it goes together with exposure to the forces of the global market, and because it contributes to demanding significant changes in European societies themselves. The risks and difficulties of Asianization and globalisation are indeed the focus points of the following study by Eric Paul, himself an Australian. He certainly does not paint a rosy

picture of Australian Asianization, but shows how it has involved a painful erosion of a civil society based on egalitarian principles. He even sees a threat to liberal democracy. For Europeans in Europe this highly critical study provides an excellent background for reflections on the dangers and opportunities of integrating Europe with Asia.

Copenhagen, 1998

Stein Tønnesson