

Letter to the Editor

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Letter from Claude Meyer, author of *China or Japan: Which Will Lead Asia?* London and New York: Hurst, with Columbia University Press and Oxford University Press, 2012.

RE: Review of my book by Dr Monir Hossain Moni, published in *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 3, December 2016, pp. 1251-1265

Dear Editor,

Following the review of my book by Dr Monir Hossain Moni, I tried to engage with him in an academic exchange of views, as it is common between scholars. However, I failed to get him to engage in this dialogue, having not received any reply from him to my several emails, which surprised me, since he raised in his review several queries, e.g. on page 1259, “I would have earnestly valued his response to my question”.

Instead, I will address some of his comments in your journal and I thank you for giving me the opportunity to do so.

Let me first recall the background of this book. It was written in 2009 and published in French in 2010. Further to the growing tensions between China and Japan, the publisher had asked me to write a short book on China and Japan’s economic and strategic rivalry in Asia. This book was intended for a large public in France, poorly informed on these

questions. Because of the success of the book in France, several foreign publishers expressed their interest. English, Japanese and Chinese versions were therefore published in 2012. The English version under review is a slim volume of 150 pages plus references and index, which paradoxically Dr Moni call “bulky”.

His 13-page review is very critical (“strident criticisms” are his words), except for the last 2 pages where he recognizes a few merits to the book. No problem for me with the book being criticized, it is the rule of the game. Although almost all the 40 reviews of the book have been quite positive, I benefitted from a few criticisms expressed on some minor points. They were expressed in a constructive way, which is not exactly the case in this one. Anyhow, I felt fully rewarded by the overall positive reviews, in particular the laudatory appraisals by some of the world’s most renowned experts on Asia which appear on the cover of the book.

I will not address all the points raised in Dr Moni’s 13-page review but only make a few comments and refute some of his statements which are not valid, in my view.

1. The accurateness of the review

While some comments of the reviewer deserve due consideration, I am wondering whether he read the whole of this slim volume. I was indeed puzzled by the following errors or shortcomings.

(a) On pp. 1252-1253, he writes: “Incontestably, this research covers only East Asia and even without giving any definition of this region” and “I am wondering to see how the book’s creator has completely disregarded all other five sub-regions of Asia”.

“Incontestably” and “completely”? He would have been better inspired, if he had read the following pages of the book:

- All the Asian regions are described on pp. xix, xx, 80, 162, as well as the groupings such as ASEAN + 3, ASEAN + 6, EAS, etc. I even go further on p. 79, where I comment on the difficulty of giving an accurate definition of “Asia” (“more a cultural concept of the Western mind”, I write) and I refer to history, even going back to the Greek historian Herodotus!

- East Asia is defined on two pages (xx and again 162), which read:” East Asia comprises China, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the ten ASEAN countries”.

- Other sub-regions? India is dealt with in several parts of the book, 22 times in total (pp. 3, 5, 14, 64, 66, 81, 84, 91, 100-102, 110-111, 114, 125-126, 128, 150-151, 159, 165, 167). A pretty high number of occurrences for such a slim book!

(b) On p. 1260, he writes: “it is also a rational question why [the author] did not propose the prospect of “China-Japan-India” triangle toward a regional cooperative grouping for the future of entire Asia.”

He would have found the answer if he had read carefully p. 151, where I write: “... Depending on the progress of the Asian Community project, two hypotheses can be envisaged for the second sequence that would unfold from 2030 onwards. If the project resulted in a Community comprising the current participants in the EAS, Japan would doubtless find its place as part of a triumvirate with China and India. The size of India’s population and its strategic clout would limit China’s influence and the Community would be inspired by the democratic values that most of its members share.”

(c) On p. 1261, he writes: “Furthermore, although the book includes a number of references in the French language it does not add any reference in either Chinese or Japanese”. There are 35 references of Chinese or Japanese authors writing in English (for economic statistics, I use Chinese or Japanese sources in the original language). Does the reviewer mean that the references must be in the Chinese or Japanese languages to be trustworthy?

In conclusion, given the above examples, it would seem preferable for this reviewer to avoid qualifying as “slipshod” the work of others, as he does for me on p. 1261.

2. The relevance of the review

I was surprised when I read the review. Indeed, I was wondering why Dr Moni, despite his “so, hectic and precious schedule” as he says, wrote such a long review on a book which “has not been done with great care and inclusive thoroughness” and whose first part “reads ridiculous”.

Even more, if indeed the quality of the volume is so poor and its merits so limited, why to have chosen it instead of one of the so many good books on the topic? I would add all the more as my book has today a basic flaw: written in 2009 and translated in 2011, it does not take into account the many changes having occurred since then in Asia, both in economic and strategic terms.

3. The nature of the book and its intended readership

From my point of view as author, there is a gross misunderstanding in this review as it seems to miss completely the very nature of the book. Consequently, most criticisms appear irrelevant for this type of book. Several times, Dr Moni designates the book as “this research”, etc. and

so, he reviews it as if it were an academic work. Apparently, he did not understand, contrary to other reviewers, that this was a short essay directed – as per the publisher’s request – to a public knowing little about Asia.

On the contrary, my other books and articles in peer-reviewed journals take the academic approach. That is the case for example for my last book which was awarded (co-laureate) the 2015 Turgot Prize (“Best book of the year in economics”) at a ceremony held at the French Ministry of Finance.

True, Dr Moni may have been influenced at first by the fact that the English version was produced by publishers which are mainly academic. But precisely, is it not an indication that these academic publishers found the book worth publishing, even if originally directed to a general public? Anyway, after they had read the book, other reviewers had no doubt about its style and intended readership, i.e. an essay directed to general readership. I would add that in this short and modest book, I tried to use the best available research on these topics to the benefit of readers not familiar with the subject: the book contains 238 footnotes, 235 references and 737 index entries.

4. The title of the book

Dr Moni finds the title quite misleading, since he judges that the book itself does not answer the question (I would add “at least according to his own expectations”). He goes on saying that this title was chosen for commercial reasons. I acknowledge that there is always a difficulty for the choice of a title truly reflecting its content and I accept that this title be questioned. However, it is regrettable that without any ground, Dr Moni explains that the choice of this title must be by a commercial motivation.

5. The structure of the book

Dr Moni writes that that “only the book’s second half ... considers its theme” and that “the first half of the volume, which has reiterated what is already discovered in the existing related literary works, reads ridiculous”. I would answer the following.

I consider that the first part (historical developments of the China-Japan relationship and respective economies) constitutes a precondition, as well as the necessary background, for discussing on a robust basis their strategic rivalry for leadership in Asia (second part). My approach may be too French and Cartesian. Indeed I have been educated through Descartes, Diderot, Braudel, etc. but is my approach so different from Paul Kennedy’s one in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*? So I do not see why the first half would “read ridiculous” in trying to give a fair account of history and economics before exploring the two countries’ rivalry. Anyhow, I think that it is healthy to have different approaches to this topic, whether from America, Asia and Europe: I was told that one reason for the success of the Chinese translation of my book was precisely that the author expresses some French/European views on the topic.

6. “Nothing new in this first part”

In writing that there is “nothing new ... in this first part ... which has reiterated what is already discovered in the existing related literary works”, the reviewer is quite right, since as it was neither my aim nor my assignment. My ambition was quite modest, i.e. to make available to the general public the best research which I have studied, as I do with my graduate students. As explained earlier, such criticism of the reviewer stems from a misunderstanding of the very nature of the book.

So I would have rather expected to be criticized, if there were some grounds for it, on the quality and relevancy of the research referred to in bibliography, footnotes, etc. Referring to the examples already given in the part “5 – The geographical scope”, it seems doubtful that such items were even checked.

7. The second part of the book

This is obviously the most important part of the book and it is on these different issues raised that a dialogue would have been fruitful, if the reviewer had accepted my suggestion to exchange views. Indeed he raises several questions and formulate several criticisms. The latter are sometimes difficult to understand, because he mixes his own points of view, which themselves can be contested.

I do not want to lengthen this text for the sake of your readers and if he wishes, I remain at his disposal for clarifying some issues. This means on both sides, because some of his statements are for me either unclear and possibly contradictory or even irrelevant.

8. A most unpleasant insinuation

Dr Moni writes on p. 1261: “Contrary to a review of this book published as a producer’s puff in *The Japan Times* ... that ill-advisedly advertises ‘Busy readers who want to quickly get up to speed on East Asia will learn much from this slim volume, one brimming with a veteran observer’s insights and knowledge’ ...”

This statement in the form of insinuation is most unpleasant as there is a nuance that *The Japan Times*’s review is a publicity for which the journalist could have been suborned, which would question his professional integrity, without speaking of mine. Actually this review, which can be retrieved by your readers at *The Japan Times*’s website,

was signed by a very respected scholar, director of Asian Studies in a US University in Tokyo, with whom I had no contact at all.

To consider a positive appraisal by a respected scholar as an advertisement for the book is a strange way of thinking. Dr Moni does not like my book, it is his perfect right. Is it a reason for him to criticize in such an ambiguous way other reviewers who do not have the same opinion? I have no problem with this reviewer criticizing my work, all the more as I can answer him in your journal. This is not the case for *The Japan Times*'s reviewer and this is, in my view, quite unfair.

Conclusion

Given Dr Moni's "strident" criticisms, I want to better understand his own stances on several issues, in the light of his own works. I found two articles on Google Scholar and a list of other pieces in his LinkedIn profile but unfortunately, none was available in my institution's library, even online. So, I must rely on the way he describes some of his own pieces in his LinkedIn profile: "*Several of his highly-authoritative, intellectually-stimulating and wonderfully-illuminating pieces have also appeared in encyclopedias, etc.*".

For all the reasons given above, I am not sure that this vibrant description of his own work applies to his review of my book. As I said at the beginning, I benefitted from criticisms expressed in some other reviews. After having given full consideration for Dr Moni's arguments, I judge that this is not the case for his review.

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