

*'Observing' the Arctic; Asia in the Arctic Council and Beyond*, Chih Y. Woon and Klaus Dodds (eds.). 2020. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, Hdbk, 256 pp., \$135, ISBN: 978-1-83910-8204; eISBN: 978-1-83910-8211 (eBook).

It is good to see academic analysis rise through the mist of tired 20th century geopolitical analysis, the haze of contemporary government policy edicts and the journalistic hype on the scramble for Arctic resources. The Arctic multilateral state, intergovernmental organisation and indigenous institutions and discourses which have developed, at great iteration and time cost, are now having to accommodate wholly external fields of vision and foreign policy ambitions from Asian state actors. Analysis of non-Arctic states' policy positions towards the Arctic is an important area of research. So too is considering various Asian states' differing Arctic Council engagement policy agendas. However, this book is not particularly about Asian states' engagement with the Arctic Council and not even really about Asian states' policies towards the Arctic.

Part 1 is a good piece of scholarship, with macroregional perspectives, theoretical contributions and institutional analysis. Part 2 is conceptually and structurally more vague, simply running through the formula of *Asian country x in the Arctic* or *Arctic state x view on Asian observers*. To have three dense chapters and six light chapters is not a bad structural form for a book, but non-research writing should be a chance to explore new ideas and to present new possibilities for taking research forwards. There are notably strong chapters here from Sebastian Knecht and Nadezhda Filimonova. Knecht explores science as policy and the increasing politicisation of science in the Arctic. His approach is analytical and source-based, being the chapter which connects most strongly with actual Arctic Council documents, a trend notably absent in many other chapters. Filimonova tackles a great inversion: China's Arctic policy as viewed from Russian sources where she explores the potential for inverted frameworks of institutional analysis. Her use of Russian academic sources also adds depth to form an image of the discourse. Medby's chapter working from the Nordics states' perspective is also a useful vision, Bennet brings in the non-state indigenous permanent participants' view, while Park's chapter on Korea as a non-China East Asian Arctic Council observer perspective rounds out the book's distributed visions approach. Not having a chapter on Japan is a weakness though, particularly given there are some excellent Japanese scholars working on both the Arctic space and Japan's Arctic policy. Also the institutional fragility of the connections between Arctic littoral states, Asian states and indigenous polities remains thinly explored.

The approaches of most chapters though are either theoretically withered, generically geopolitical or pseudo-anthropological, none of which are particularly convincing in assessing the efficacy of Arctic Council institutions. Public administration, international relations, political science or public international law approaches could all have been useful here, but are absent. Only Knecht's chapter takes the political institutional subject matter seriously and considers the subjects as institutions, state bureaucracies and sources of international legal agency. Most other chapters, by treating the subjects through socio-anthropology or geopolitics lenses weaken their analyses. Would we really take the same tired Mackinder or Brzezinski geopolitical approaches or patronizing narratives of the historical 'othering' to analysis of Spain or Italy joining the Arctic Council as observers? Consider the counter-factual analyses of the 'geopolitical potential of Spain's Arctic maritime ambitions' or the 'critical anthropology of Southern Italian economic networks and their incompatibility with public international law and multilateralism in the Arctic'. Despite many of the authors' anti-Orientalist frameworks, a distinct unwillingness to treat state actors as institutional agents emerges from this set of supposedly state analyses.

One chapter stands out as especially egregious. Chaturvedi attempts to explore ecological, social and geopolitical connectivity, but his insubstantial writing struggles for long paragraphs to find someone else's definition of globalisation and connectivity and then awkwardly wedges in the trendy Anthropocene trope of 'imagination.' He gets to the end of the chapter still undecided on his terms citing 'so-called ecosystem services.' For a paper against Orientalist scramble, Chaturvedi's becomes simply that, a source-less generalisation of China's *Belt and Road*, where a cottage industry of academics have spent seven years making hay on a topic left unresearched, instead opting for 'it's too early to tell.' Chaturvedi claims that 'Beijing has eschewed producing cartographic mappings of the BRI so as not to conjure up misconceptions' which is odd given

my collection of China state publisher produced *Belt and Road* maps. This hand-waving approach is indicative of the wider book where a persistent theme of anti-Orientalism sometimes degenerates into outright anti-Europeanism, and yet the authors in individual and as a group systematically ignore primary Asian sources and many barely touch the Arctic Council primary sources. Relying on Bruno Maçães or Parag Khanna in an analysis of Asian states' engagement with the Arctic negatively impacts the status of geopolitics as a serious sub-discipline. Chaturvedi like many of the authors in this volume also falls back on the easy pseudo-history that all European colonial history including that in the Arctic was fundamentally driven by racism. This is a plague of lazy thinking that has infested universities across the world and contributed to the significant hollowing out of institutional reputation and intellectual strength. Throughout the book, there are constant references to 'the other' 'Orientalism' and 'Anthropocene' without any scholarly engagement with the philosophies underpinning them, Said, Foucault, Derrida and the Frankfurt School critical theorists are eschewed, presumably unread certainly uncited, to engage in academic trendyism.

The topic of Asian state observers in the Arctic Council is hugely important. But this unfortunate book presents mostly tired tropes and uninventive thinking and is ultimately only really a stocking-stuffer for the academics' publications lists. The chapter list feels disjointed and unsystematic, but that is a generic fault of the genre. The \$135 market valuation by the publisher is patently

ridiculous, but is not limited to this volume. At this price on this imprint, this will be a volume which is institutionally collected by Arctic and polar specialist libraries and will remain largely unread there. With little research in this book, it reads more like the indulgent notes of a conference, where academics in a small pond have simply referred to their own conversations as qualitative data or autoethnography.

Asian state policy in the Arctic Council is serious, and it should have deserved a serious treatment. However, the result of this book is a series of essays written from the ensconcement of the high-castle without much thought of connecting to the practical institutional realities of the Arctic Council. While almost every chapter in the book decries the lack of expert nuanced opinion on the five Arctic Council observer states introduced in 2013 the topic remains largely unexplored. Unfortunately, this volume does not help the specialist in deepening an understanding of the Arctic region and the Arctic institutional actors and state processes, nor provide any useful overview or introduction to examining how external actors' domestic policies and regional spatial concerns determine the dialogues, discourses and institutional norms which govern the patterns of behaviour for Arctic Council institutional actors. (Tristan Kenderdine , Future Risk, Almaty, Kazakhstan. ([tristan.leonard@frsk.com](mailto:tristan.leonard@frsk.com))).

DOI: [10.1017/S0032247421000619](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247421000619)