CONCLUSION
ASEM Has Delivered Significant Benefits to Southeast Asian Countries

The existence and significance of ASEM as a forum for inter-regional relations between Asia and Europe is little appreciated in both regions, and even less in the rest of the world. Within Asia, only a small number of state officials and non-official actors have any real understanding of, or engagement with, ASEM. Nevertheless, ASEM has survived and even enlarged. Most Asian leaders have continued to attend the ASEM summits despite the frequent failure of their European counterparts to attend with a complete team and despite little attention being given to this inter-regional institution. Why is this? What has ASEM delivered to its Asian partners? If the sceptics and critics are right about ASEM's weaknesses, why has it been maintained? This puzzle provides the rationale for this investigation into why and how ASEM has sustained, from the Southeast Asian perspectives, given the challenges in maintaining multidimensional relations and the inter-regional character of ASEM. This concluding chapter brings together the various strands of the overarching arguments in this study, and in so doing seeks to make a contribution to the literature of ASEM.

Whereas other studies of ASEM have indicated the challenges and what have been perceived as failures of these inter-regional relations, a distinctive feature of this study is its focus precisely on the question of why ASEM has endured as long as it has. Scholarly articles and reports during the initial years
of ASEM mostly consist of the excitement and hopes for the new framework of relations written in neoliberal perspectives or historical–cultural points of view (Stokhof and van der Velde 1999; CAEC 1997; Dent 1997/1998). The positive tone, however, largely disappeared and was replaced by the negative assessments and criticisms of ASEM when the relevance of the inter-regional relations seemed to wane after the Asian financial crisis (Dent 1999; Forster 1999; Richards and Kirkpatrick 1999). In addition, the relevance of ASEM was questioned after the attack on U.S. territory in 2001. The overwhelming influence of the United States was able to persuade almost all international institutions, including ASEM, to devote their attention to security issues and the global campaign against what the United States termed “terrorism”. Terrorism became the main issue in the fourth ASEM Summit in 2002 in Copenhagen and ASEM leaders’ position to cooperate to combat terrorism was placed as the first point in the Chairman’s Statement (ASEM 2006f).

Subsequently, scholars developed another critique beyond its failure to take root as a strong framework of economic cooperation after the Asian financial crisis. They questioned the relevance of ASEM as a new partnership to counter the United States (Dent 2001, 2004; Dosch 2001; Ruland 2001; Loewen 2007). This coincided with the resurgence of neo-realist analysis in the international relations literature more generally. Nevertheless, a number of scholars have studied ASEM from other dimensions. Their explorations have added to the understanding of ASEM in terms of its institution (Loewen 2007; Reiterer 2004, 2006, 2009; Yeo 2004; Kaiser 2004; Japan and Finnish Ministries of Foreign Affairs 2006) as well as its place in regional identity building in Asia (Lee and Park 2001; Gilson 2002, 2005; Yeo 2003; Gilson and Yeo 2004).

A study of why ASEM has worked for Southeast Asian countries or what are the perspectives from Southeast Asian countries about the longevity of ASEM had not been undertaken seriously. These gaps in the literature create the opportunities for further studies, and this thesis is a response to that need. Its focus has been on investigating ASEM’s longevity from the Southeast Asian perspective and it has used the existing literature to formulate the working hypotheses to guide the initial phase of the research process, especially in developing the scheme for interviews.

This study has attempted to consider ASEM in terms of inter-regional and not just “inter-national” relations, an approach commended by some previous scholars (Gilson 2002; Reiterer 2006), as well as in the post-colonial framework. This approach has the potential to use ASEM as a laboratory of Asia-Europe relations. This thesis, however, focuses on the Southeast Asian perspectives, especially in its relations with the longevity of ASEM, because Southeast Asian behaviour in international relations is distinctive; the Asian
approach to negotiation and cooperation is different from the non-Asians. Nevertheless, the results of this study can be considered for some thoughts under the inter-regionalism and the post-colonial studies as seen later.

The relevance and significance of this study of ASEM’s longevity from the Southeast Asian perspective derives from several considerations. To begin with, this research strengthens the study of ASEM by incorporating the insights of involved or relevant actors through broad-ranging in-depth interviews. The interviews with various actors across Southeast Asian countries are valuable resources to be put side by side with the secondary data and to be analysed using an interpretive method.

In addition, the ASEM inter-regionalism is a new practice in international relations. The inter-regionalism of ASEM is also distinctive because it excludes the United States and it brings together the ASEAN countries with the Northeast Asian countries as an Asian group to meet and coordinate collectively with another regional group (the EU countries). The investigation of ASEM from the Asian perspectives reveals the opportunities and challenges to the relations, as well as forming better observations on this kind of relations. This research highlights the role of ASEM’s inter-regionalism in the development of an intra-regional grouping while at the same time providing empirical evidence of the influence of the European integration over other regions. This investigation contributes in this way to an understanding of the role of external powers such as the EU in constructing a regional identity in East Asia.

At its heart, this study examines three types of possible benefits of ASEM to Southeast Asian countries that might help to build support from the ASEAN countries, which, in turn, explain ASEM longevity. Because of the quite different nature of each of these possible dimensions of national benefit, a different analytic framework has been needed for each. This kind of approach throws light on a more comprehensive understanding of international phenomena such as ASEM for two reasons. First, the issue of regional institutions such as ASEM and its longevity is a complex discourse, and no single analytical framework can provide a complete answer to the puzzle raised in this study. Second, the perspectives of Southeast Asian officials and non-officials regarding ASEM are varied, ranging from identity building to concern about the Europeans’ interventions in human rights practices in Asia, to the frustration as well as advocation for the informality of the ASEM institution. There is no analytical framework that by itself can explain those perspectives. Nevertheless, the use of the three frameworks in this study does not aim at paradigmatic unity. Although mixing the three frameworks is theoretically not possible, applying — in parallel — each of them to analyse the most relevant or suitable issues can reveal a more complete
analysis because the three analyses may be complementary to each other in explaining the main question in this thesis.

Finally, this research focuses on the relations between states’ interests versus their need for cooperation that eventually shape the course of international institutions including inter-regional forums such as ASEM from the perspectives of state and non-state actors. The focus on how states exercise their power in international institutions is not new, but this study explores the use of an inter-regional institution (ASEM) by the Southeast Asian countries in two directions: towards the external actors (EU countries) and towards other regional countries in East Asia. By incorporating the views from non-state actors, this study considers not only the government-to-government relations but also people-to-people relations in ASEM to reveal what functions and interests ASEM has served for the Southeast Asian countries and participants.

The data for this thesis were collected through: documentary study; news study; two participant observations; and eighty-two in-depth interviews with officials, scholars, journalists, business people, and civil society in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Japan. Although these four kinds of data include meeting records, secondary data, news, observable facts, and transcripts of the interviews, this thesis is mainly driven by the interview data. The application of the inductive method in this study allows the data to be explained by the most relevant framework of analysis borrowed from the international relations discipline.

The limitations of this study are acknowledged. Because of familiar research constraints of time and funding associated with such a large multi-country topic, the focus has been on Southeast Asia, and even here it has not been feasible to cover all Southeast Asian countries equally. Nor could participant observation be extended to cover the ASEM summits. Nevertheless, this thesis provides a much fuller empirical grounding for deeper understanding of inter-regional relations between Asia and Europe in ASEM than has previously existed, particularly in terms of what ASEM has delivered for Southeast Asian countries. This, in turn, sheds light on the longevity of ASEM from the Southeast Asian perspectives.

The richness of the in-depth interview data could be translated into contextual insights with the help of the interpretive approach. The benefit in using this approach is enhanced by the fact that the researcher comes from a country in Southeast Asia, and this has helped her capture the insights from Southeast Asia and convey the perspectives based on the understanding of the context from which those perspectives have come.
However, the application of the interpretive approach in this study faces the inevitable challenge of possible researcher-induced bias. The difficulty is to find the right balance between recognizing the researcher’s prior beliefs that can enrich inference making during the analysis, and preventing those beliefs from colouring the research in a judgmental way. To find a reasonable balance, this research took two steps: first, complementing the findings from the interview data and the participant observations, which unavoidably include subjective perceptions and opinions either from interviewees or from the researcher, with other types of data such as documents, news, and the academic literature. Secondly, instead of focusing on only data that comfortably supports the working hypotheses, the study has also addressed alternative views and analysed how such views emerged. The alternative views in this research are addressed in several parts in Chapters 1 to 3. By applying these two strategies, this book has tried to take advantage of the interpretive approach while controlling its weakness.

This study identifies three dimensions that explain what ASEM has delivered to the Southeast Asian countries: the relations between ASEM and the development of an Asian identity; the foreign policy advantage that can be pursued in the ASEM process; and the preference of Southeast Asians for the ASEM informal institution. The following sections explain each of the three dimensions. It is followed by further discussion over the findings of the book.

**RELATIONS BETWEEN ASEM AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES**

This book reveals three possible explanations to answer what ASEM has delivered to the Southeast Asian countries: the relations between ASEM and the development of an Asian identity; the use of ASEM for foreign policy advancement by ASEAN member countries; and the maintenance of informality in the ASEM institution.

First, ASEM is a useful forum for Southeast Asian leaders and meeting participants due to its role in facilitating the development of an Asian regional identity or identities. ASEM has not only brought Asia closer to Europe through more frequent meetings and interactions in government-to-government as well as people-to-people forums, but also helped shape Asian identities among ASEM Asian partners, placing the Southeast Asian countries in the same regional group with the Northeast Asian countries. The ASEM process has managed seven summits for Asian and European leaders and
numerous meetings of state apparatus, the private sector, and civil society. With three tracks of interactions and through political dialogues, economic cooperation, and sociocultural interactions, the ASEM process offers plenty of opportunities to develop the “we” feeling among Asian officials and non-officials. The broader channels of communication and interactions in the ASEM process have made it possible for state and non-state actors from East Asia to become much more familiar with each other. However, the inter-regional mechanism in ASEM or ASEF forums has sometimes developed into dynamics and, in some cases, crises through which the Asian participants position themselves as “Asian” vis-à-vis their European counterparts. To put it differently, ASEM takes part in social construction to create a stronger voice of Asian regional identity.

As shown in Chapter 1, the role of ASEM in the construction of Asian identity is mainly highlighted by those who are involved directly in the ASEM process or who have personally attended ASEM or ASEF forums such as state officials and non-officials from civil society. This thesis argues that the opportunities to meet counterparts from other East Asian countries is a significant factor that allows the Asian participants to share the regional awareness and to build the regional identity as the forums allow interactive socialization with Asian and European counterparts. The forums have improved chances for the Asian participants to communicate and interact, facilitating the “meeting of hearts and minds”, a cognitive process that encourages the development of inter-subjective understandings among them.

In ASEM and ASEF forums, cognitive processes among Asian participants occur in two ways: by determining their concept of self as part of the Asian group and by comparing their Asian positions with those of their European counterparts. The communication and the socialization in the ASEM and ASEF forums inform perceptions, concerns, and intentions of other Asian fellows, making them even closer and more familiar with each other. At the same time Asian participants also compare and contrast their interests with their European counterparts. The cognitive process during the communication and interaction with the European participants helps the Asian participants to identify the similarities or differences between their concerns and interests and those of the European group (interviews with C24, C25, D50 S52 and D48). The process brought about awareness among the Asian people that they were different from the European people and that they shared more similarity with other Asians. Subsequently, they felt more comfortable among the Asians than among the Europeans.

The growth of regional consciousness and collective intentionality for Asian identity was strengthened, even to those who had not intended to build
a “coalition”, by the behaviours of European counterparts in the forums: first, by European critical assessment of Asian political affairs, especially those dealing with practices of human rights. Political values are the most sensitive issues in Asia and Europe relations so it would naturally provoke polarization. Second, the interview data demonstrates the significance of European distant attitudes in meetings and the way they are grouped among themselves in triggering reactions by Asian participants.

Another factor that contributes to strengthen Asian identity building in the ASEM process is cultural closeness and acquaintance among the ASEM partners from the Southeast and Northeast Asian countries. The intersubjective cultural affinity (Ruggie 1998a) and the colonial memory that creates a “psychic unity” (D21) have made the Asian participants at ASEM or ASEF forums prefer to affiliate themselves to other Asian partners.

Thus, the sense of shared identity among the Asian participants in the ASEM process has been generated by cognitive processes and the collective experience in ASEM or ASEF forums. Those forums are in fact the social forums in which Asian participants are involved in an active process to understand and interpret about “us” and the “other”.

Because the communication and interactions among Asian state and non-state actors were undertaken differently in term of frequency and intensity, it is inevitable that there have been various layers of identities among the Asian leaders and participants. In the ASEM process, the Southeast Asian participants bear at least three identities: their nation-state, ASEAN, and Asia; whereas Northeast Asian participants hold two: their nation-state and Asia. The existence of layered identities among the Asian participants of the ASEM or ASEF forums has caused some doubts about the existence of Asian identity or identities. The frequently asked question is, “Which identity?” However, the layered identity in Asia is unavoidable as a consequence of the dynamics of the region. The fact that there are several layers of identities among Asian participants does not mean the identities do not exist. The existence of Asian layered identities is obvious in the ASEM process. Indeed, the pre-summit meeting mechanism of ASEM (Figure 1.3) which consists of the intra-Asia coordinating meetings among ASEAN countries and among non-ASEAN countries reinforces the grouping within the ASEM Asian side. The intra-Asian meeting mechanism reflects the expansion of identities among Asian participants that is also identical with their cognitive institutions (Ruggie 1998b): nation-states, ASEAN, and APT (which is also equal with the ASEM Asian side1 (Figure 1.3).

In short, the channels of communication and interaction in the ASEM process were available when the Southeast Asian countries were developing
Southeast Asians and the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM)

their Asian regional consciousness and building the sense of regional identity with the Northeast Asian countries in the 1990s and 2000s. This ideational function of ASEM is complementary with other regional channels such as APT and EAS. Thus, ASEM has helped facilitate the development of Asian identity or identities through the frequent social interactions among leaders and participants. The sense of regional awareness resulting from the cognitive process and collective experience in the ASEM process, in turn, has been used by the Southeast Asian countries for other forums. Despite ASEM’s low profile in Asian regionalization, leaders from Southeast Asian countries keep attending ASEM summits which in itself contribute to the longevity of ASEM.

Second, this book argues that ASEM has strategically benefited the Southeast Asian countries because the inter-regional institution seems to be an important forum to pursue foreign policy advantages for the ASEAN members. This conclusion is suggested based on the interview results and other supporting data particularly that on Myanmar’s accession to ASEM and the application of the framework of the strategic usage of international institutions by states. The case study of Myanmar’s admission to ASEM highlights not only a discrepancy in Asia–Europe political values but also the ability of ASEAN countries and China to take advantage of European economic interest for their political purposes. As Chapter 2 has shown, Asian–EU countries’ disagreement on Myanmar’s admission before the fifth ASEM Summit in Hanoi in 2004 led to a deadlock of the ASEM process and posed the most serious threat to the ASEM continuity. ASEAN countries were more confident about articulating and pushing an Asian position supportive of Myanmar’s accession to ASEM, because of both the delicate relations between Japan and China, and China’s willingness to endorse ASEAN’s position. ASEAN countries were able to forge a collaborative effort with China in this case through the coordination mechanism in the ASEM process that facilitates intra-regional meetings before the region-to-region meetings.

In line with the arguments of Simmons and Martin (1998, 2002) who perceive international institutions as strategic tools by states rather than as a medium for cooperation, the data from interviews and news suggested that ASEAN countries and China have used ASEM to gain political advantages over the EU countries. Whereas they had failed to negotiate their support for Myanmar in the ASEAN–EU forum, ASEAN countries obtained a stronger political bargaining power vis-à-vis the EU counterparts because of China’s support. For China, its support for the ASEAN position in the process of Myanmar’s admission to ASEM seems to relate to its strategy to build closer
relations with the countries in Southeast Asia and to reaffirm its relations with Myanmar amid its competition with India to approach the Myanmar military regime.

China’s presence in ASEM seems to enhance not only the position of the Asian side but also the importance of ASEM. This research does not investigate in-depth the role of China in ASEM but data from interviews suggest that China’s participation in ASEM is a very significant power that not only makes the EU countries value ASEM but also attracts other Asian countries to maintain the inter-regional forum. The attendance of forty-three Asian and EU leaders in the seventh ASEM Summit hosted by China in 2008, the first time EU leaders attended ASEM summit almost in full after the inaugural summit, indicates that China is a very, if not the most, attractive partner in ASEM.

Thus, despite its neglected position in regional affairs, ASEM seems to have delivered strategic advantages — of a traditional realpolitik type — for ASEAN countries and China. ASEAN countries treat ASEM not only as an additional forum to address issues that cannot be tackled in ASEAN-EU forum but also to play a stronger role in regional decision making. In addition, China has appeared to be the magnet of ASEM that attracts Asian and European countries to stay in ASEM. Despite China’s interest in using ASEM for its own foreign policy advantage, its commitment and participation in the ASEM process has contributed to ASEM’s longevity. The theme of the ASEM summit in Beijing 2008, which was Vision and action: Towards a win-win solution, clearly shows that China has an interest in supporting ASEM and to transfer the “talk-shop” into action without underplaying its interests. ASEM has survived because the Asian countries still perceive it as a forum worth maintaining for the advancement of their traditional interest in foreign policies. This pursuit of the traditional power games such as the one shown in the Myanmar case is likely to be one of the reasons why the Asian countries maintain ASEM.

Third, this study argues that ASEM’s institutional design has worked comfortably for the Southeast Asian countries. There are several studies from institutional theorists, which provide useful guidance for situating questions about the institution of ASEM. This perspective draws on institutional theorists (Lipson 1991; Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001; Kawasaki 2009) who argue that institutional design can be a deliberate choice of states to achieve particular outcomes. States may choose or design the type of their cooperation framework, and may adjust it, according to their need in the evolution of their cooperating institution. Accordingly, the adoption of informality for international institutions could possibly be the result of states’ deliberate
intention in the initial phase as well as in the course of cooperation. Stone, Slantchev and London (2008) have also argued that small states’ behaviour in international institutions would prefer shallow cooperation with wide participants. These perspectives shed light on the behaviour of the Asian states in general and Southeast Asian countries in particular to maintain the inter-regional relations through ASEM but keep it as an informal forum and non-binding engagement.

Chapter 3 reveals that during ASEM’s initial years, the Southeast Asian leaders who initiated ASEM seemed to foresee the complexity of intra-regional relations that they designed ASEM’s mechanism to be flexible. The difficulties in accommodating and negotiating principles and objectives of various constituents from both regions required flexibility in the ASEM process. Because of the different needs of its constituents, ASEM has had to be operated through a loose mechanism. For the inter-regional relations to survive, the ASEM institution had to become less institutionalized and avoid binding commitment.

ASEM has survived despite the complexity of the inter-regional relations. ASEM’s longevity seems to be supported by its soft institutional arrangement that takes place as an informal ASEM process with non-binding decisions. Some people may see these aspects as hampering ASEM’s development to a higher level of institutionalization but the informality creates flexibility for ASEM partners to counter the complexity. ASEM’s soft institution helps ASEM partners, whose differences are so various and wide, to learn and negotiate. With the growing number of ASEM partners, the soft institutional design may be even more necessary and pivotal to make ASEM acceptable to all partners.

Institutional informality has been a significant factor contributing to ASEM’s longevity. As one of the interviewees commented, “Currently, [there is] no pressing need to strengthen Asia-EU relations, [It is] only a goodwill diplomacy” (S68). Nevertheless, given the soft institutional arrangement of ASEM, maintaining the inter-regional relations is not costly. Owing to the non-binding principle, ASEM does not require significant political and financial commitments.

Despite widespread neglect and even disdain, ASEM has various functions that complement with other regional initiatives and bilateral relations between Asia and Europe and among Asian states. ASEM is a low-cost diplomatic channel between Asia-Europe and/or among Asian countries that does not need a lot of investment from participating countries; yet it can be a valuable instrument in a time of crisis. Compared with the potential intangible
linkages that ASEM can activate in times of crisis, maintaining ASEM appears to be significantly less costly than terminating it. One of the interviewees commented that,

Nobody wants to be seen as a bad guy who kills ASEM. It started as dialogue but now A-E need more than dialogue. ASEM may stay there to add to other channels [of communication], merely as a low cost channel with no binding policy. [The] Asian and European countries will tackle serious issues in other forums. They can be bilateral, ASEAN-EU, China-EU [forums]. ASEM is a low cost forum so nothing wrong to maintain it in case we need it sometime in the future. (S31)

Data gathered for this study reveals that ASEM institution has been built in accordance with the needs of the Southeast Asian countries, that is, inter-regional relations managed by an informality and non-binding principle. The Southeast Asian countries seem to influence ASEM with these institutional characteristics that are similar to those of their regional institution, ASEAN. This factor, in turn, helps maintain ASEAN countries’ acceptance and support to ASEM. In addition, the ASEM institution contributes to its longevity because of two considerations. First, the informality of the ASEM institution, a soft institution, creates flexibility for ASEM, allowing the inter-regional forums to accommodate the wide diversity, varying interests, and different capabilities of its partners. Second, ASEM’s soft or informal institutional arrangement seems to reduce the cost of maintaining cooperation through region-to-region relations between the Asian and European states while opening up opportunities for the two regions to develop different kinds of strategic relations.

In this light, it can be seen that ASEM has produced benefits for the Southeast Asian group. There is no intention here to overstate these gains; they are modest, but they are not insignificant. They also help explain why Southeast Asian governments continue their engagement with ASEM despite the multiplicity of other forums that have sprung up.

In sum, for Southeast Asian leaders not only are there some genuine — if modest — gains to be had from maintaining ASEM, doing so avoids the costs likely to be associated with terminating it. It is an efficient form of diplomacy. ASEM has survived because Asian and European countries still perceive it as a forum worth maintaining. ASEAN countries treat ASEM as additional forum to address issues that cannot be tackled in other forums. The fact that ASEM has been established also helps sustain it. Thus, maintaining ASEM is more useful than superseding it.
LEARNING FROM SOUTHEAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVES ABOUT ASEM

The previous section has elaborated the findings of this book. They provide some opportunities for further analysis. This section tries to place those findings in a broader context because the observations of the Southeast Asian perspectives about ASEM can reveal regional dynamics in Asia and the potency of (East) Asia as a regional entity.

First, the development of identity building in Asia may be better facilitated in informal settings, be it in regional institutions or in the arrangement of meetings. This notion that has been built throughout this study can be useful in the study of identity building. The informality is needed to help a more interactive socialization among Asian leaders and people because only in such circumstances can the cognitive process among meeting participants create a more genuine openness, which turns to acquaintance, then perhaps trust and inter-subjective understanding. It is hard to be attached to other people if there is no genuine conversation and interaction. Informality provides more room for Asian leaders and participants to establish more solid human relations that are necessary for the feeling of a group, the identification to a particular identity, to develop. It will be interesting to observe to what extent the informality helps facilitate the development of regional awareness among Asian participants in comparison with the pressure of external factors such as EU participants. Nevertheless, a combination of those two factors has apparently been obtained from the ASEM process by Southeast Asian participants with their counterparts from the Northeast Asian countries that allow them to develop an Asian identity.

The significance of the informal setting to help develop regional identity could be an interesting consideration in the context of EU studies too, especially in regard to the EU’s efforts to develop European citizenship. The EU countries are known for their preference for formal institutions in managing cooperation (Fawcett and Hurrell 1995; Palmujoki 1997; Ruland 2001; Fawcett 2004) and a number of interviewees reveal the informality of ASEM caused widespread scepticism among the European elites (S19; S36; I42). It will be an advantage for EU to learn to understand the benefits that come from the informality of ASEM’s institution in regard to the development of shared regional awareness and identity building. The advantage of an informal setting can shed light on the context of Europe where the European Commission took a top-down, legal-formal approach in using cultural policy and political symbolism to develop the notion of EU citizenship (Shore 2000) and where the causal relations between European identities and EU institutions have been questioned (Risse 2005).
Second, informality is important and necessary to keep institutions going. Lipson (1991) is correct in arguing that to sustain cooperation, flexibility is needed, and informality is a way to create this flexibility in international or regional institutions. The flexibility is needed because the challenges to cooperation are too big while direct, short-term, concrete outcomes may not be secured (Lipson 1991). In ASEM, the challenges are the diversity of its partners and the difference in Asia and Europe in their cooperation culture and approaches. Without informality, ASEM may not have survived at all, much less embarked on its membership enlargements.

The preference for informality over formalization can also reveal the operation of the Asian cooperation culture. The informality of ASEM’s institution is influenced by ASEAN’s institution that has been brought by the Southeast Asian countries to ASEM. The ASEM’s institution, after all, is also the result of political calculation among the Asian countries and the compromise between its Asian and European partners. This is in line with Goldstein, Kahler, Keohane and Slaughter (2000) who perceive that the level of the legalization of institutions is shaped by political dynamics. For Southeast Asian countries, the process is more important than short-term material gains as they emphasize more the process of confidence and trust building. The criticisms of ASEM informality such as Jones and Smith (2007a, b) seem to overlook the Asian cooperative culture that emphasizes “region building” rather than “institution building” (Acharya and Johnston 2007) and the preservation of sovereignty of the involved countries (Kahler 2000; He 2004; Khong and Nesadurai 2007). In the context of regional institutions, whether such formality and institutional building approach can create the “real” region is still in doubt (Hettne and Soderbaum 2002). The bottom line is, with the informal institution, actors may achieve goals that cannot otherwise be achieved. Thus, the informal institution should not be underestimated, as something significant may emerge from it; after all, formal relations usually start with informal contacts.

An implication of this study is that it is better to let ASEM evolve at a pace acceptable to the partners in both regions — which, in practice, probably gives greater weight to those who want to move less quickly. Enforcing a movement of legalization or creating a higher level of institutionalization may not help in sustaining the ASEM process. As Chapter 1 has shown, the trust has not yet become robust between the Asian and the European groups. From the East Asian perspective, cooperation cannot genuinely develop without such trust. The European leaders who were absent from the summits have, in fact, suffered from the exclusion from the opportunities to build trust with their Asian counterparts. While criticizing the ineffectiveness of ASEM
forums and the inability of ASEM to bring about concrete material gains, and not bothering to attend the summits, European leaders actually miss a chance to approach Asian leaders in a more genuine way. Asian leaders, officials and scholars seem to have understood the short-term, materialistic reasons behind the frequent absence of the European leaders and very critical to this behaviour (D02; D17; S35; D48; D50). In addition, the underlying reason for the Southeast Asian countries’ aversion to formal and binding institutions is to protect their sovereignty (Kahler 2000; He 2004; Acharya and Johnston 2007). As ASEM was created with the purpose of improving the understanding between the two regions, as stated in the Chairman’s Statement of the first ASEM Summit (ASEM 2006b), this inter-regional institution should be left as it is; as the forum to build the inter-subjective understandings that may in turn create trust among its partners. The trust built through the ASEM process may be transferred to a more concrete cooperation projects in other forums.

Third, the benefits that the Southeast Asian countries have extracted from their region-to-region relations with the EU countries in ASEM can help explain the relations between the two regions in the post-colonial context. This study has revealed that the colonial memories have, in subtle and little noticed ways, united a majority of the Southeast and Northeast Asian countries within ASEM. In addition, the interaction with the European participants in the ASEM process, particularly in regard to the European distant attitude and criticisms of the Asian political values and practices, has exacerbated the Asian perception of the past in which the exploitative nature of European colonialization is remarkable. The shared awareness of the past regarding European colonialism and the limited success of the trust building between the Asians and the Europeans in the ASEM process, can underplay the efforts to recover the linkage between peoples in the two regions.

The potency of the Southeast Asian states and China to take collective actions is also an interesting issue for post-colonial studies as the former colonized countries in Asia usually perceive themselves as the victims of Western colonialization and as marginalized states. Observing the power relations between the two regions is particularly interesting in the current context where the “under-developed” Asians have become the global economic power houses, whereas the European countries have seemed to be losing their ground in the global arena. It is not only crucial to observe how the former colonized Asian countries and the former colonial powers in Europe cope in the period that has been perceived as the global power shifting but also important to observe how the Asian states adjust the pressure to take global “responsibility” and how the European states deal with the possibility of being...
“subordinate”. Will the Europeans play their “old games” of divide and rule with the Asian powers to avoid losing their “traditional” power?

Thus, this study can enrich post-colonial scholarship by revealing two findings: first, that the common perception about the continuity of the European exploitative nature in the post-colonial period is one of the factors that united the Asian participants in the ASEM process; second, the pressure from the EU countries in the inter-regional relations has encouraged the Asian participants to take collective action vis-à-vis the European counterparts.

Fourth, inter-regional relations, such as in ASEM, can represent an important pattern of global affairs in the future. More than encouraging a diverse region such as East Asia to form collective actions, the inter-regionalism of the ASEM forums can create a regional entity that can challenge prevailing patterns of global politics. The region-to-region relations in ASEM have created such circumstance that is conducive enough not only for Asian region-building but is also a meaningful political action, for example as the Asian countries have shown in the Myanmar case.

Such inter-regional relations can be an important focus in international relations studies. This is because not only has the end of the Cold War removed structural barriers for regional dialogue and provided a more favourable environment for regionalism (Buzan 1991; Katzenstein 2000; Fawcett 2004) but also in the future, regions may evolve as global actors (Dosch 2001; Katzenstein 2006; Hurrell 2007). Therefore, inter-regionalism may become an important model of interaction in the world. By definition, inter-regionalism is different from the Westphalia international system that highlights the state-to-state relations. In practice, as shown in this study, the region-to-region relations are even more complex than state-to-state relations as they deal with intra-regional as well as extra-regional dynamics. So, whereas state-to-state relations is perceived as two-level games between international bargaining and domestic politics (Putnam 1988; Moravcsik 1993, 1997), the region-to-region relations can actually be four-level games in which the intra-regional bargaining and inter-regional dynamics intervene between global pressure and domestic politics. In addition, the region-to-region relations are different from bloc-versus-bloc relations that prevailed during the Cold War. Currently, the study, as well as the practice, of inter-regionalism has only been limited to EU-Asian in ASEM and EU-Mercusor. This study can help set the path for future studies of the inter-regional paradigm as it provides insights into the Southeast Asian side of ASEM’s inter-regionalism.

Finally, Asian countries can be a powerful international actor if they can work together. This research reveals that under the inter-regional framework, with togetherness and “cheap” investment, Asian countries could dictate the
meeting agenda and take a leading role over their European counterparts, who less than a century ago were still the colonial rulers in most of ASEM’s Asian countries. The experience that Asian countries have gained in ASEM can make them more confident to take up further challenges, such as soliciting common Asian positions on global issues such as climate change and restructurization. Asian common positions will be important in an era where the global power is shifting, that is followed by responsibilities shifting, to Asia. If they can build more solid common positions, the Asian countries may be able to undertake the global responsibilities in their own term and ways. The analysis in this study reveals that the Southeast Asian countries can be the force behind such Asian movements.

In closing, the main question that emerges in contemplating the future of ASEM is whether the argument developed here about ASEM’s utility in the past will continue to hold true after the absorption of new members such as Pakistan, India and Mongolia — and even more so, Russia, Australia, and New Zealand. These effects will likely take some years to emerge. It would also be fascinating to extend the scope of this study to include a detailed investigation of ASEM’s utility to the whole Asian countries in ASEM or to European countries. Exploring such issues are the opportunities for future research but the Epilogue may put forward some latest developments in this context.

Notes

1. As stated in Chapter 1, the focus of this thesis is the ASEM process from 1996 to 2008 when the ASEM Asian side merely consisted of ASEAN countries, China, Japan, and South Korea.

2. The U.K. Prime Minister is the only head of state of major European countries who did not attend the Beijing Summit in 2008. Indeed, apart from the ASEM inaugural summit in 1996, British top leaders only attended the second summit in London in 1998 when the United Kingdom was the host.