Anthony Giddens and Martin Wolf in London, Thomas Friedman in Washington, Saskia Sassen in New York, John Meyer and Manuel Castells in California ... nearly all of the best-known writers on globalization come from the parts of the world that are doing the globalizing, not from the places that are getting globalized.

In Global Exposure in East Asia, Taiwanese sociologist Ming-Chang Tsai tells the story from the other side. People in China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan have been on the front lines of globalization as waves of economic and social change washed over East Asia.

There was a time not long ago when the globalization of manufacturing was synonymous with the transfer of production from Europe and North America to East Asia. Jobs went first to Japan, and then fled in a “flying geese” pattern to Taiwan and Korea and ultimately to coastal China. Westerners tend to think of globalization in these kinds of purely economic terms. They rarely (if ever) pause to think about how globalization has affected societies on the East Asian side of the equation.

Tsai uses survey data from the East Asian Social Survey, an opinion survey conducted in four East Asian countries, to do just that: to chart how ordinary people of all social classes have experienced globalization on the receiving end. He explores the sometimes common and sometimes distinct impact of globalization in China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. And often they do line up like flying geese: on many indicators Japanese lean in one direction, Koreans and Taiwanese fall in the middle, and Chinese occupy the far tail.

For example, nearly 44 percent of Japanese people surveyed have been to Europe or North America, compared to 30 percent for Taiwanese, 20 percent for Koreans, and just over 1 percent for Chinese. These and all of Tsai’s other statistics are based on national equal-probability samples of each country’s population, and thus are expected to be properly representative.

Travel and other cross-border experiences are highly “class-stratified”, meaning that people with managerial jobs and university degrees have significantly more cross-border connections than people without. Of course, those who speak English are also more likely to be globally-connected, though here the causality may not be as clear. But because most East Asians learn English in school, Tsai argues that it is English ability that leads people overseas, not the other way around.

Visiting the outside world is not the same as liking it—or wanting it to come home to you. Tsai finds that the Chinese have the most positive view of employment mobility, with the Taiwanese a close second. He surmises that Chinese workers do not view foreign workers as a threat because foreign workers in China are rare and occupy niche high-skill positions. And though he doesn’t mention it, Taiwanese people’s positive views on mobility probably results from the fact that so many Taiwanese themselves work overseas. Japanese respondents have the least favorable view of employment mobility.

A similar “flying geese” pattern holds for nationalism. Based on a series of questions about the acceptance of foreign products and attitudes toward international confrontation, Tsai finds that Japanese and Korean respondents tend to be the least nationalistic, Taiwanese and Chinese the most. A major gap here is the failure of Tsai’s survey data to address head-on just what “foreign”
and “national” mean for people in Taiwan. Tsai takes it for granted that all Taiwanese people view Taiwan as a distinct nation with its own national identity. This is now the majority view in Taiwan, but the full reality is more complicated—sufficiently complicated to cloud survey results.

Across all four countries respondents were very open about having people of other nationalities (whether Asian or Western) as colleagues, neighbors, and relatives, with one exception: Chinese people are wary of foreigners in general, and especially wary of the Japanese. This is not surprising, given historical sensibilities and the recent upsurge in Chinese nationalism, but it is nonetheless disturbing. Fewer than 29 percent of Chinese would be willing to accept a relative marrying someone from Japan.

But this isn’t a distinctively anti-Japanese sentiment. Only 37 percent of Chinese would accept a relative marrying someone from North America, despite the obvious economic benefits that doing so could bring to a family. China’s greater xenophobia is probably explained by Chinese people’s lower overall rates of exposure to foreigners. In fact, the only “foreign” marriage partners that the majority of Chinese people favor are Taiwanese.

One of the most surprising findings reported in Global Exposure in East Asia is that while the vast majority of people in all four East Asian countries feel a strong sense of attachment to their localities and countries, only in Japan and Korea are there any signs of a wider attachment to East Asia as a whole. Here the “flying geese” pattern breaks down. Koreans especially report a sense of East Asianness, followed by Japanese. Taiwanese and Chinese show hardly any connection to East Asia at all.

This may be a manifestation of J-pop and K-pop in reverse. Japanese and (especially) Korean popular culture have swept over the region. It may be that the acceptance of their cultures overseas have made Koreans and Japanese feel more connected to the region, more like they belong to a larger East Asian whole. Or maybe the sense of a larger attachment is a defensive reaction to their historical position on the edge of a much larger Chinese cultural zone. Interestingly, it’s older Koreans and Japanese who are most likely to express a sense of East Asianness, not younger ones. Tsai notes these trends, but does not speculate on their meaning.

This reluctance to interpret is the greatest weakness of the book. Tsai takes his data at face value, placing his results within the context of existing theories of globalization but declining the opportunity to use his results to build a new theoretical perspective of his own. One gets the feeling that there is a much more interesting book just under the surface, but this potentially fascinating peek into the minds of East Asians is forever between the lines. Tsai is a scientist, not a speculator.

The science seems solid. But a little more speculation would have made Global Exposure in East Asia much more interesting to read—and ultimately much more enlightening. Tsai clearly has more data at his fingertips about how East Asians experience globalization than any of the rest of us ever will. We rely on anecdotes; he has access to facts. But if he won’t hazard opinions based on his facts, he leaves the rest of us in the dark. A little more interpretation would have gone a long way toward making this a proper Asian answer to Giddens, Wolf, and other Western writers on globalization.