

## Book Review

Ying-kit Chan and Chang-Yau Hoon, *Southeast Asia in China: Historical Entanglements and Contemporary Engagements*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023. 167 pages. ISBN: 978-1-7936-1214-4.

Due to geographical proximity, Southeast Asia has been perceived as a close neighbour of China all this while. However, their relations have been rather asymmetrical, thanks to the immense size, technological advancement and economic power of China. As the authors of this volume rightly note, “The power asymmetry is reflected in the apparent bias in the literature where most studies are about China’s presence in or engagement with Southeast Asia rather than the reverse. Studies on the presence or influence of Southeast Asia in China have been a marginal enterprise” (pp. x-xi). Moreover, “the attention paid to historical and socio-cultural exchanges between China and Southeast Asia remains scant” (p. x). Hence, this volume could fill this lacuna by examining the complicated relations between China and Southeast Asia from a Southeast Asian perspective.

This volume comprises two main parts. The first part is made up of three chapters dealing with Southeast Asia’s historical entanglements with China. The second part consists of another three chapters which focus on Southeast Asia’s contemporary engagements with China. However, this review will focus on the first, third and last chapters that deal with very important but still understudied themes.

The first chapter explores the role of Southeast Asian Chinese volunteers in wartime China. This is an important but still understudied topic related to the contributions of Southeast Asian Chinese to China. The Southeast Asian Chinese volunteers were ethnic Chinese male labourers who left Southeast Asia for southwestern China during China’s war with Japan in 1937-1945 to get involved in the Allied war efforts. Most of them were ethnic Chinese in Malaya. To a great extent, their involvement in the war effort was an outcome of China’s Nationalist regime’s attempt to tap into the ethnic Chinese in Malaya “as a war resource” (p. 7). Nevertheless, after the end of the war and the establishment of Communist China in 1949, their contributions to the war effort were ignored by the Chinese regime because

of the hostility between the Nationalist and the Communist forces. This is also due to the volunteers' "fluid — if not fragmented — identities at a time when citizenship had yet to become an important qualification of the nation-state" (p. 4).

Based on the biographies and autobiographies of Singapore's first three ambassadors to Thailand, the third chapter explores how these ambassadors, who were ethnic Chinese Singaporeans, made use of their Chineseness and cultural upbringing in laying the foundation of Singapore-Thailand diplomatic relations. They also had a strong affinity with China. The first and third ambassadors were born in China but later moved to Southeast Asia with their parents. The second ambassador was born in Singapore but later went to China to further his studies. Prior to their appointment as ambassadors, they had established strong business connections with ethnic Chinese capitalist elites in Thailand. In comparison with other neighbouring countries of Singapore such as Indonesia and Malaysia, the Thai government was much less suspicious and hostile to its ethnic Chinese minority because in general they were already highly assimilated into Thai society. Indeed, Chinese Thais "were perceived to be indispensable to economic development" of Thailand (p. 47). Hence, Singapore was able to tap into the well-established business networks between Chinese Singaporean businessmen and Chinese Thai capitalist elites in cultivating diplomatic relations with Thailand.

The role of Southeast Asian capital in China since the Reform and Opening-Up Policy in 1978 is the central theme of the last chapter. Ethnic Chinese conglomerates and prominent ethnic Chinese capitalists are the source of capital. The Reform and Opening-Up Policy opened up ways for ethnic Chinese conglomerates in Southeast Asia to invest in China. As this chapter notes, the shared cultural background between Southeast Asian Chinese investors and local Chinese in China "was able to help them foster trust and develop relationships with key figures and other major investors" (p. 122). Many ethnic Chinese capitalists invested in the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) or their ancestral homeland in southern China. Some of them also cooperated with China's state-owned enterprises in various industrial and development projects. Therefore, the investments of ethnic Chinese conglomerates and prominent capitalists in China have significantly benefited the development of China's economy and infrastructure. Nevertheless, this chapter also cautions that the expansion of Southeast Asian Chinese business

in China might rekindle the deeply-rooted suspicion of the loyalty of the ethnic Chinese among the Southeast Asian indigenous population. Therefore, it is crucial “for Southeast Asian Chinese capitalists to negotiate and balance their national and political identity with their cultural and ethnic identity” (p. 125).

Overall, this volume is a welcome and significant addition to the scholarship on the relations between Southeast Asia and China. It provides readers with valuable insights into the presence or influence of Southeast Asia in China, as well as a more balanced perspective on historical and socio-cultural exchanges between Southeast Asia and China. It would be of greatest use to scholars and general readers with an interest in this area of study.

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