

The Smiling Dragon – China's Soft Power in Southeast Asia

Implications for Germany and the EU



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Edited by Céline-Agathe Caro
June 2022

THE SMILING DRAGON – CHINA'S SOFT POWER IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Implications for Germany and the EU

Editor: Dr. Céline-Agathe Caro

Date of Publication: June 2022

© 2022, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Thailand

Publisher:

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Thailand Office
75/2 Soi Sukhumvit 61, Klongtan, Wattana
Bangkok 10110
Thailand

+66 (0) 2 7141207-8

office.thailand@kas.de

www.kas.de/thailand

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The publication was produced with the financial support of the Federal Republic of Germany.



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Cover Photo: Paper toy dragons for the Lunar New Year celebrations in Bangkok's Chinatown.

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Other sources indicated accordingly.

Proofreading: Stephan Phelan

Design/Layout: Deddeaw Laosinchai, Natsuda Saraprang

Printing: P. Press Co., Ltd.

ISBN 978-616-90475-8-2

Table of Contents

Abbreviations	vi
Foreword	viii
1. Introduction	1
2. Key Findings – Regional Overview	9
Governance and Diplomatic Influence	10
Education and Cultural Influence	18
Influence in the Media	26
Economic Influence	32
3. Case Studies	39
Cambodia	40
Malaysia	50
Singapore	62
Thailand	76
Vietnam	90
4. Summary Analysis and Concluding Observations	99
Summary Analysis	100
Concluding Observations	
Is China’s Soft Power Projection Successful in the Five Southeast Asian Countries of this Study?	106
5. Policy Recommendations for Germany and the EU	115
Policy Recommendations for Germany and the EU	116
Appendix	123
China’s Perspective on Governmental Cooperation with ASEAN and its Members	124
Main Sources for the Figures and Tables	128
Contributors	144

List of Figures, Tables, and Information Boxes

FIGURES

Figure 1:	Visits of state and government leaders to China	12
Figure 2:	High-level visits (2014–2019)	13
Figure 3:	Size of Chinese diplomatic network compared to the US	15
Figure 4:	Vaccines acquisitions between January and July 2021	17
Figure 5:	Percentage of Chinese students among all foreign students enrolled in higher education	20
Figure 6:	Number of foreign students from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries in China	21
Figure 7:	Number of Confucius Institutes (CI) and size of Chinese diaspora	24
Figure 8:	Number of Confucius Classrooms	25
Figure 9:	Chinese acquisition or ownership of local media outlets	28
Figure 10:	Content sharing agreements between Chinese news agencies and local news outlets	29
Figure 11:	Share of FDI from China compared with total FDI	36
Figure 12:	China FDI stock in the year 2020 (Case Study Cambodia)	48
Figure 13:	Top products imported from China by value (Case Study Cambodia)	48

TABLES

Table 1:	Shared regional platforms with China in 2021	14
Table 2:	Top 5 international and regional issues for Chinese diplomatic outreach	16
Table 3:	Chinese state-run broadcasters in local TV and satellite packages	27
Table 4:	Share of two-way trade with China compared with total international trade volume	35
Table 5:	Most prominent BRI projects	37
Table 6:	Number and share of Chinese tourists compared with the total number of foreign tourists	38

INFORMATION BOXES

“Wolf warrior” diplomacy	5
Cambodia People’s Party	41
China Radio International (CRI)	46
<i>The Governance of China</i> by Xi Jinping	52
The Confucius Institute (CI)	54
China Global Television Network (CGTN)	56
The Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre	67
The Chongqing Connectivity Initiative (CCI)	72
The Friendship Medal	80
The Milk Tea Alliance	82
South China Sea	92
The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)	98

Abbreviations

ACC	Asian Cultural Council
ACD	Asia Cooperation Dialogue
ACFTA	ASEAN-China Free Trade Area
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADMM-PLUS	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting PLUS
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
AIT	Asian Institute of Technology (Thailand)
AKC	Association of Khmer Chinese
ANN	Asia News Network
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
AOIP	ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
AUs	Autonomous Universities
AVI	Cambodian Asian Vision Institute
BIMP-EAGA	Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area
BOT	Build-Operate-Transfer
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CBMs	Confidence-building measures
CCFR	Cambodia-China Friendship Radio
CCI	Chongqing Connectivity Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CDC	Council for the Development of Cambodia
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CI	Confucius Institute
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia
CICP	Cambodia Institute for Cooperation and Peace
CP	Charoen Pokphand Group (Thailand)
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPCCC	Communist Party of China Central Committee
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
CRI	China Radio International

DAP	Democratic Action Party (Malaysia)
ECRL	East Coast Rail Link
EPC	Engineering Procurement and Construction
EU	European Union
EVFTA	EU-Vietnam Free Trade Area
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
ICAPP	International Conference of Asian Political Parties
JCBC	Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation
KAS	Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
KZI	Kong Zi Institute (<i>pinyin</i> name of Confucius Institute)
LMC	Lancang-Mekong Cooperation
MAS	Monetary Authority of Singapore
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCI	Media Chinese International (Malaysia)
MCKIP	Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park
MIDA	Malaysian Investment Development Authority
MoEYS	Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport
NRCT	National Research Council of Thailand
NTU	Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)
NUS	National University of Singapore
OCAO	Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (China)
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PAP	People's Action Party (Singapore)
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (Malaysia)
PLA	People's Liberation Army (China)
PRC	People's Republic of China
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
RFA	Radio Free Asia
RUPP	Royal University of Phnom Penh
SAF	Singapore Armed Forces
SCCCI	The Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry
STC	Southern Transport Corridor
TCCEA	Thai-Chinese Culture and Economy Association
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
UYFC	Union of Youth Federation of Cambodia
VOA	Voice of America
YES	Youth Interns Exchange Scheme

Foreword

Dear Reader,

I am delighted to present Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's study on the topic of China's soft power in Southeast Asia. This publication aims to analyse China's soft power strategies in selected ASEAN countries and issue recommendations for Germany and the European Union (EU) in this field. The subject of China's growing influence on a global scale is of the highest importance for decision-makers and interested observers across the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, and beyond.

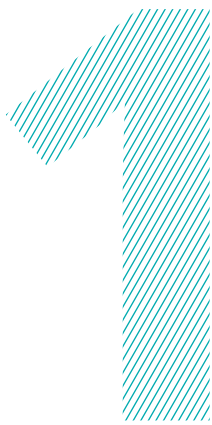
In recent years our foundation has carefully traced China's increasingly sophisticated influence on all continents through its global network of offices in more than 100 countries. Amid growing tensions with the US and Europe, a nuanced picture of the nature of our relationship with an ascendant and increasingly assertive China is more than needed. Europe has outlined its bilateral relations with the People's Republic along three dimensions: partnership, competition, and systemic rivalry. Unfortunately, the latter has become more and more dominant in recent years as a democratic and rules-based Europe sees itself fundamentally challenged by a totalitarian system that considers itself as a fundamental alternative to "the West". But ambiguity remains, with major challenges, such as pandemics or climate change, which require closer global cooperation with China.

Southeast Asia has experienced that ambiguity for a long time, with territorial disputes in the South China Sea on one side, but also strong economic dependency on the other. The rising strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region for Germany and the EU has recently been laid out in several guidelines by single European States and the European Council. They all acknowledge the indisputable need for deep and diversified relations with the region, and particularly with ASEAN – a dynamic market with some 640 million consumers and the EU's third-largest trading partner outside Europe, after the US and China. Southeast Asia has also become a geostrategic hotspot in terms of stability, owing in large part to its key role in global value chains. The EU has therefore stepped up its diplomatic relations with ASEAN and other like-minded partners in the region. This is not least to counter China's rising influence in government and diplomacy, in education and culture, media, and the military.

In order to be able to shape the European efforts in a more concise way, it is therefore crucial to understand China's soft power influence in more detail: How has this influence evolved? What strategies and instruments have been developed and deployed? How might Europe strengthen its own position in the region? To answer these questions, KAS assembled local expertise from five countries in Southeast Asia: Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia. Their analysis paints a differentiated picture of the complex nature of China's engagement, and presents a wake-up call for Europe to accept these challenges and increase its efforts. But this needs a better understanding of the engagement and success that China has with its soft power projection in Southeast Asia. We therefore hope that this study will serve as a conversation starter, and that the carefully researched and curated data will inspire academics and politicians alike to get engaged in a fact based constructive discussion on the topic.

I would like to thank the project's coordinator and supervisor Dr. Céline-Agathe Caro, KAS director Thailand, and her team, as well as the country directors of KAS in Southeast Asia, and all the experts who committed to the success of this project. May this volume contribute country-specific, first-hand experiences to the public debate, as well as to parliaments, government bodies, think tanks, civil society actors, and the media.

Christian Echle
Director Asia and the Pacific
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung



INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

Dr. Céline-Agathe Caro



Leaders pose for a family photo at the ASEAN-China Summit with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on the sidelines of the 35th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, Thailand, on 3rd November 2019.

Source: © Soe Zeya Tun, Reuters

WHAT IS SOFT POWER?

“Wolf warrior” diplomats, Confucius Institutes, pandas, “vaccine diplomacy”... China’s manifold soft power efforts in ASEAN (and beyond) are expanding and intensifying. They range from investment and media outreach to varied forms of diplomatic, academic, professional, and cultural exchange programs, to public health interventions and humanitarian assistance.

The concept of soft power was first introduced in the late 1980s by Harvard Professor Joseph S. Nye, Jr. According to Nye’s definition, power itself is the capacity to influence the behaviour and preferences of other actors (states, societies, companies) in the furtherance of one’s own objectives. Nations have several ways to exert that power: A state can use “hard” power, aka force or the threat of it, through political, economic, or military channels (“sticks”). It can also seek to induce desired behaviour through payments, favourable trade agreements, or strategic “deals” (“carrots”). Otherwise, it can seek to encourage desired behaviours and public attitudes through attraction, persuasion, and more constructive means (“honey”). These “soft” alternatives coalesce around the practice of nudging, rather than coercion, which is affiliated with hard power.¹

According to Joseph Nye, a country’s soft power is somewhat similar to a nation’s “brand”. It derives from its political values and norms, foreign policy that is seen as fair, legitimate and possesses moral authority, international reputation, and finally the reach and popularity of its culture and cultural production. In the 2000’s, broader definitions also included economic and diplomatic tools of power like foreign investment and trade, development aid and overseas assistance programmes, or building coalitions and setting the agenda in multilateral organisations.² Analysing foreign perceptions, choices, and policies of a given country can be useful in measuring the impact of its soft power, which can both enhance and reflect its international prestige and partnerships, its economic, academic, and cultural appeal, as well as its self-confidence and long-term prosperity.

¹ See for example: Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, Basic Books, New York, 1990. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs, New York, 2004. More recently: Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Soft Power after Ukraine”, *Project Syndicate*, 3rd May 2022, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/soft-power-after-russia-war-in-ukraine-by-joseph-s-nye-2022-05>

² Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power is Transforming the World*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2007, p. 6.

THE CHINESE APPROACH

The concept of soft power gained notoriety in China in October 2007, when then-President Hu Jintao mentioned the term officially and stressed the need to “enhance the influence of Chinese culture worldwide” for the nation’s prosperity.³ His successor, Xi Jinping, recognized early the importance of this strategy, according to the American sinologist David Shambaugh. Once president, in 2014, he announced his intention to “increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s message to the world”.⁴ In 2017, President Xi used an address to the National Congress of the Communist Party to reaffirm his objectives: “strengthen people-to-people and cultural exchanges with other countries” and “tell China’s stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country’s cultural soft power.”⁵ In the context of its growing economic and military power, scholars have also documented China’s objective to weaken the narrative of a “China threat” – common in Western media – and replace it with one that emphasises its “peaceful rise”.⁶

This comprehensive, top-down approach, aimed at nurturing a more positive image of the PRC abroad, represents China’s own particular understanding of soft power. While Joseph Nye described it as an asset that can exert influence somewhat independently of the state, the People’s Republic deploys it more as a tool – an active instrument of the state and the ruling party. Some experts call this Chinese variation “sharp power”.⁷

³ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Liberia, “Full text of Hu Jintao’s report delivered at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on Oct. 15, 2007”, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/celr/eng/gyzg/a123/t375202.htm>

⁴ David Shambaugh, “China’s Soft-Power Push. The Search for Respect”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2015, Volume 94, Number 4, p. 99–107, here p. 99. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-16/chinas-soft-power-push>

⁵ Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”, Address delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 18th October 2017, p. 39, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf

⁶ Falk Hartig, “How China Understands Public Diplomacy: The Importance of National Image for National Interests”, *International Studies Review*, Volume 18, Issue 4, December 2016, p. 655–680, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw007>

⁷ See for example: Joan Pablo Cardenal et al, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, National Endowment for Democracy, 2017, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence-Full-Report.pdf>

In 2015, Portland Communications and USC's Center on Public Diplomacy began compiling and publishing the Soft Power 30 index. Several other rankings followed, generally based on the quality of a country's political institutions, the extent of their cultural appeal, the strength of their diplomatic network, the global reputation of their higher education systems, the attractiveness of their economic model, and their level of digital engagement with the world. China ranked 27 out of 30 in the Soft Power 30 index for the years 2018 and 2019, and 4 out of 10 in the Asia Soft Power 10 index in 2019, behind Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, respectively.⁸

Since early 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic that originated in the city of Wuhan and negative international reporting on human rights and security issues, Beijing has relied on its soft power to mitigate somewhat its reputational damage and protect China's appeal. It developed new soft power tools such as "mask diplomacy" and later "vaccine diplomacy", and alternatively used "wolf warrior" diplomats to respond aggressively to criticism. In the Global Soft Power Index produced by the British consulting firm Brand Finance, China achieved its best performance ever in 2022, ranking 4th worldwide and overtaking Japan as the highest-ranked nation in Asia.⁹

"Wolf warrior" diplomacy

"You speak in such a way that you look like part of the virus and you will be eradicated just like the virus. Shame on you." This is how a Chinese diplomat responded on Twitter to a user who criticized China during the COVID-19 pandemic. This also exemplifies what are now known as "wolf warrior" tactics – a diplomatic approach that aggressively denounces any perceived criticism of the Chinese government or China in general. The term derives from the Chinese action movies "Wolf Warrior", which were very successful in the PRC: a highly stylised and hyperbolised portrait of elite soldiers fighting China's enemies at home and abroad. Although foreign media did not coin the term until 2020, Chinese diplomats and politicians had begun using this method several years earlier.

See: Peter Martin, *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*, Oxford University Press, 2021

⁸ Jonathan Mcclory et al., *The Soft Power 30*, Portland and USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2019, p. 40 and p. 67, <https://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2019-1.pdf>

⁹ *Global Soft Power Index 2022*, Brand Finance, <https://brandirectory.com/softpower/report>

COUNTRIES SELECTED AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study attempts to provide a more detailed analysis of China's soft power projection in Southeast Asia, and local responses to those efforts, in order to better understand its impact and potential implications for players in the region, as well as Germany and the wider European Union (EU).

This regional study focusses on Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam (Laos and Myanmar are omitted here due to limited available information). The chosen area is geographically proximate to China and falls within the scope of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a “vehicle for soft power” geared toward global infrastructure development and regional integration across Southeast Asia. This group consists of relatively small countries, most with land-links to their much larger northern neighbour and characterized by centuries of exchanges with China. It has also been a nexus of contested power between China and the US, from the Cold War to the present day. Interactions with those global players continue to shape the modern history of the region and the decisions of these smaller states.¹⁰

This study, based on quantitative data, aims to identify and quantify China's soft power efforts in these five states, to analyse the PRC's strategies in that area, and to evaluate their relative success. It concludes with policy options and recommendations for Germany and the EU to seek ways to increase engagement in Southeast Asia.

METHODOLOGY

In each Southeast Asian country selected for this study, KAS commissioned a renowned local academic China specialist to help gather quantitative data (“hard facts”) and provide insights on the domestic perspective in that country. The collaborative studies were conducted between May and September 2021. Some of the experts were willing to indicate their contribution in the publication. Where “researchers” are mentioned in the text, especially in relation to combined data used in several figures and tables as presented in the key findings (Section 2), this refers to all five in-country scholars who collaborated with KAS.

¹⁰ See for example: David Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet: America and China in Southeast Asia*, Oxford University Press, 2020.

At the outset, KAS formulated a set of questions to ensure standardised data collection, ease of comparison, and singularity of focus. Researchers drew on official documents, academic publications, newspaper articles, and private interviews they conducted with government officials or representatives of relevant institutions. The data provided in this study is not exhaustive, but represents the best efforts of the research team, comprising the five national China experts, their research assistants, and the KAS colleagues in the five focal countries who contributed to this publication.

Where facts and statistics were openly verifiable, KAS double checked all data, and cross-referenced where necessary. Answers to the core KAS questionnaire were not always sufficient to the purposes of gathering quantitative data. In cases where different sources provided conflicting evidence, the research team sought to obtain the most comprehensive data by triangulating the available information and prioritizing official sources. While the research team looked for the most recent information, the COVID-19 pandemic had a thoroughly disruptive impact on regular patterns of engagement. For the sake of drawing clearer comparisons across a fixed timeframe, KAS therefore decided to focus on China's engagement in Southeast Asia for the five years between 2014 (one year after the Chinese government adopted its BRI strategy) and 2019. Some questions, however, may also include data from 2020 and 2021.

KAS used quantitative data provided by the five national researchers to design figures and tables underlining key findings, and thereby illustrate significant trends emerging in the five selected countries in Southeast Asia with regard to China's soft power projection (Section 2).

Analysis provided by in-country consultants was translated into the national case studies (Section 3). Where those experts wished to remain anonymous, they submitted their analysis to KAS as inputs to the research project. The KAS team – in a common cross-border effort – then used these inputs as a basis for the national case studies.

KEY QUESTIONS ADDRESSED IN THE STUDY

The study covers four areas: governance and diplomacy, education and culture, media, and economy.

Governance and Diplomatic Influence

In this area, the questions were designed to help quantify the high-level visits between China and the five focal countries, the size of China's diplomatic mission in each, and the regional platforms China shares with them. The study examined China's practice of "vaccine diplomacy", and the receptiveness of each country to Chinese vaccines, as opposed to those from other sources. To the extent possible, we also explored and assessed the agendas of Chinese diplomatic missions to each country. Finally, our guiding question was to determine how actively China promotes its political values and advance its positions on regional or international issues within these neighbouring states.

Education and Cultural Influence

Questions on this topic focused on academic exchanges – assessing the flow of students from China into Southeast Asia, and vice versa. Particular attention was paid to the Chinese promotion of Mandarin learning, and the prevalence of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms in each country. Case studies considered China's ability to shape public opinion through cultural and academic appeals and people-to-people exchanges.

Influence in the Media

We assessed and analysed the activities of Chinese government broadcasters across the region, and their transmission of programmes in local languages. We also examined content-sharing agreements between local and Chinese news agencies, as well as Chinese ownership of local outlets. Case studies mentioned well-known social media influencers and weighed China's status as a media player in the relevant states.

Economic Influence

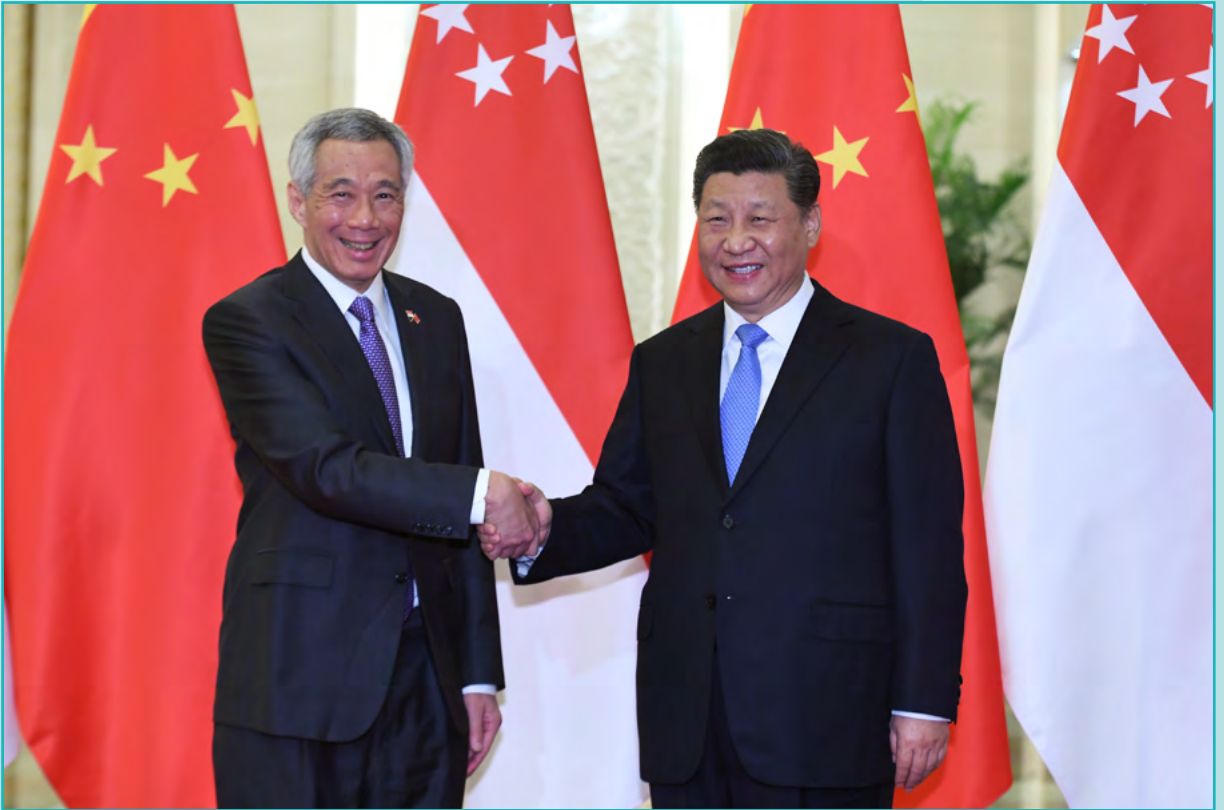
This area of research was intended to measure levels of economic interdependence between China and the selected states. Metrics included the volume of two-way trade, the value of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and BRI projects, and the number of Chinese tourists. Case studies required the in-country researchers to evaluate the domestic importance of economic ties to China and to assess China's level of activity and importance in terms of trade, investment, and economic cooperation.

2

KEY FINDINGS – REGIONAL OVERVIEW

GOVERNANCE AND DIPLOMATIC INFLUENCE

Sasiwan Chingchit



Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong shakes hands with China's President Xi Jinping before their meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, on 29th April 2019.

Source: © Madoka Ikegami / Pool New, via Reuters

Over the years, China’s diplomatic influence has broadened and deepened in all nations within the scope of this study. Recent decades have seen more frequent official visits, expanding diplomatic networks, and multilateral engagements across a range of shared platforms. This diplomatic outreach as well as the use of digital tools contribute to promote and protect the PRC’s image and interests in the region. This section presents these efforts on relations with each of the five nations under consideration.

HIGH-LEVEL VISITS

Official visits are clearly essential to bilateral relations. Face-to-face diplomacy helps build trust and deepen cooperation, and agreements are generally reached during meetings between state representatives. Beijing has placed heavy emphasis on ties with world leaders in its vicinity¹ and, as the PRC’s international influence increases, foreign officials have used regular visits to their Chinese counterparts to secure and enhance cooperation with China. Studies show that at the world level, between 1990–2019, foreign heads of state and government visited China more often than the US.² Figure 1 illustrates that between 2014 and 2019, the leaders of the countries in our study visited China almost annually – often twice in one year, and sometimes even three or four times. By comparison, most of these leaders visited the US only two or three times in total, in the same six-year period (2014–2019).³

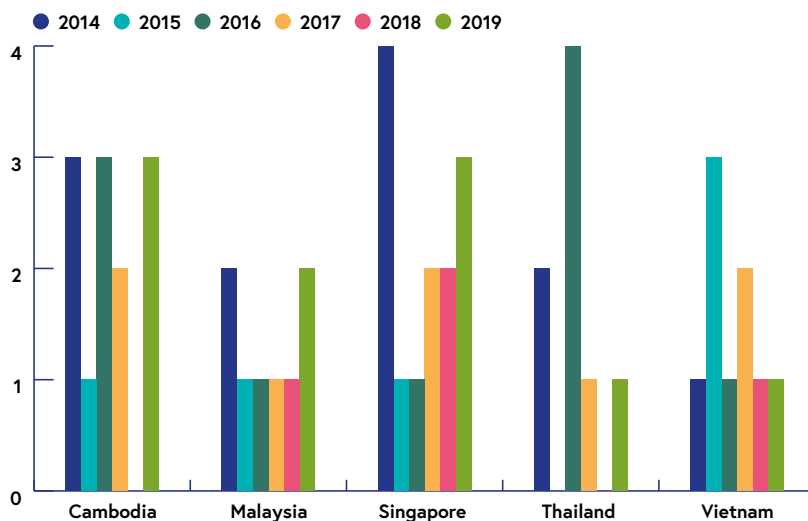
Data (see Figure 2) shows frequent visits to China by royal family members and official delegations from the five Southeast Asian nations under consideration. Reciprocal visits were also common between 2014 and 2019, but at a markedly lower volume – officials of the PRC played host more often than guest in this period by a substantial margin.

Countries with closer ties to China – in terms of policies and/or leaders demonstrably favourable to the PRC – have made more frequent high-level visits. Cambodia and Thailand are key examples. Royal visits from those states have

¹ “What Do Overseas Visits Reveal About China’s Foreign Policy Priorities”, China Power, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), <https://chinapower.csis.org/diplomatic-visits/>

² Neil Thomas, “Far more world leaders visit China than America,” *The interpreter*, 28th July 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/far-more-world-leaders-visit-china-america>

³ “Visits by Foreign Leaders”, Office of the Historian, US State Department, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/visits>

Figure 1: Visits of state and government leaders to China

Source: Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

State and government leaders include presidents, prime ministers, and their deputies. In the case the head of state is a member of the royal family, his visits to China do not appear in this figure. See Figure 2 instead. If the deputy prime minister of a country is also a minister with a portfolio, his visits do not appear in this figure either.

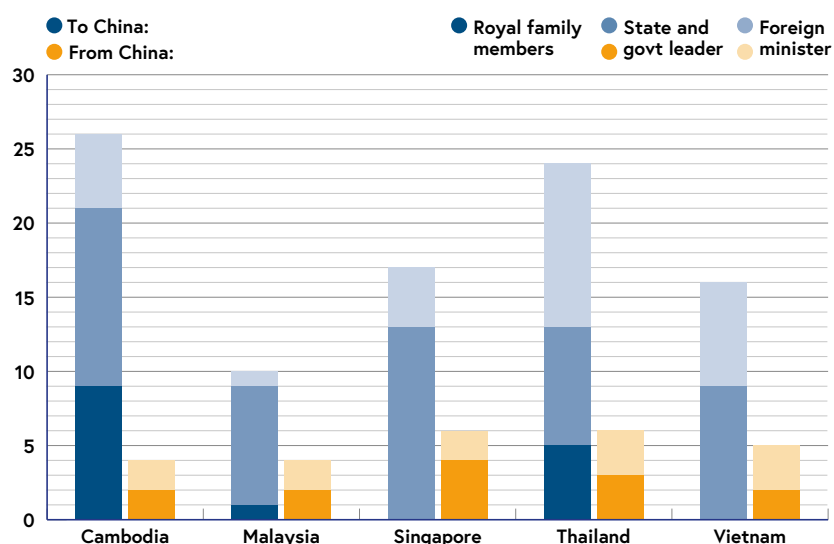
contributed to bilateral ties, and China appears to give particular importance to this domain of relations, awarding Thailand's HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn and Cambodia's HM Queen Mother, Norodom Monineath Sihanouk, the "Friendship Medal" in 2019 and 2020, respectively.

There are also frequent visits between officials of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and political parties of other countries. For example: between 1914–2019, CCP leaders made 24 visits to counterparts of Cambodia's People Party (CPP), while CPP leaders made 26 visits to China.⁴ Delegates from the CCP and the Chinese National People's Congress also visited Vietnam on a regular basis.⁵ One key figure in this regard is Yang Jiechi, the director of the general office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission of the CCP. As a member of the Politburo and State Councilor, Yang Jiechi ranks higher than Foreign Minister Wang Yi, which makes him the actual highest-ranking diplomat in the PRC. Between 2014 and 2019, Yang Jiechi came to the PRC's five neighbours in Southeast Asia

⁴ Internal Aide Memoire on CPP-CCP Cooperation, CPP Commission for External Relations, Cambodia, 2021. Information provided by the in-country researcher in Cambodia.

⁵ Data combined from various sources by the Vietnamese in-country researcher commissioned by KAS.

Figure 2: High-level visits (2014–2019)



Source: Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

State and government leaders include presidents, prime ministers, and their deputies. In the case the head of state is a member of the royal family, his visits are counted with the royal visits. If the deputy prime minister of a country is also a minister with a portfolio, his visits do not appear in this figure, unless he is the foreign minister. In the case of Thailand and Singapore, the prime minister and the foreign minister went to China together once. We counted only one prime minister's visit for each respective delegation.

regularly. In 2014 only, he made two official visits to Vietnam, one to Singapore, one to Malaysia, and one to Cambodia.⁶

ENGAGEMENT IN MULTILATERAL PLATFORMS

Beyond prioritising bilateral relations with Southeast Asia, the Xi Jinping administration has also engaged with neighbours across multilateral platforms, and most intensively with riparian states of the Lancang-Mekong River: Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. With these three countries, China shares membership in seven platforms of regional cooperation, and engages as a dialogue partner in two further platforms (see Table 1). As a dialogue partner of ASEAN, China meets regularly with delegates from member states in the organisation's various collaborative forums such as ADMM Plus, East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, etc.

⁶ "What Do Overseas Visits Reveal About China's Foreign Policy Priorities", China Power, CSIS, *art. cit.*

Table 1: Shared regional platforms with China in 2021

● Member ● Partner ● Neither partner nor member

	China	Cambodia	Malaysia	Singapore	Thailand	Vietnam
Asia Cooperation Dialogue	●	●	●	●	●	●
Asian Development Bank	●	●	●	●	●	●
Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank	●	●	●	●	●	●
Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership	●	●	●	●	●	●
Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation	●	●	●	●	●	●
Greater Mekong Subregion	●	●	●	●	●	●
Lancang-Mekong Cooperation	●	●	●	●	●	●
Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia	●	●	●	●	●	●
ASEAN	●	●	●	●	●	●
Mekong River Commission	●	●	●	●	●	●
Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area	●	●	●	●	●	●

Source: Data combined by in-country researchers based on official sources

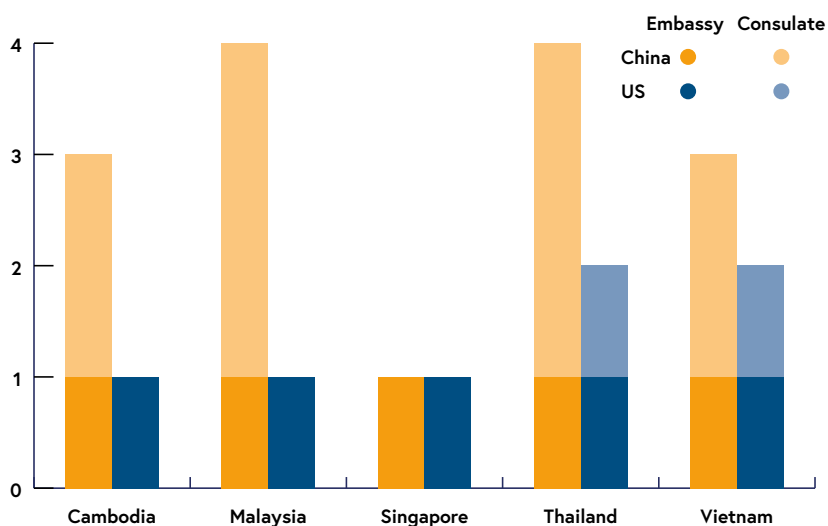
DIPLOMATIC OUTREACH

Consular representations, meanwhile, work toward three core purposes: to protect the interests of nationals abroad; to develop economic, scientific, and cultural relations; and to supply administrative and travel documents.⁷ In 2019, China surpassed the US as the country with the most diplomatic posts around the world.⁸ The high number of Chinese consular missions across Southeast Asia serves to underline the PRC’s investment in fostering interpersonal relations, as well as multi-level and multi-dimensional collaboration with host countries. As seen in Figure 3, the extent of China’s diplomatic network in the five states under consideration is larger than that of the US. China has three consulates in Thailand and Malaysia and two in Cambodia and Vietnam while the US only operates central embassies in each of the five nations, with one supplementary consulate apiece in Thailand and Vietnam.

⁷ Thierry Balzacq et al. (eds.), *Global Diplomacy: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 129.

⁸ “China now has more diplomatic posts than any other country”, *BBC*, 27th November 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-50569237>

**Figure 3: Size of Chinese diplomatic network compared to the US
(number of embassy and consulates)**

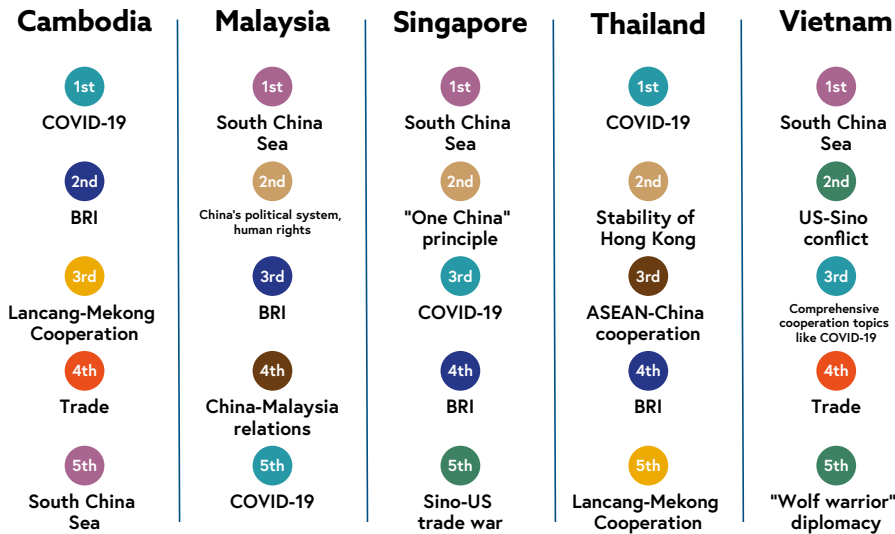


Source: Data combined by in-country researchers based on official sources

Embassy websites, Facebook pages, and media engagements have been used to promote bilateral cooperation, as well as to advance and protect China's interests overseas. Like their peers from other countries, Chinese ambassadors and diplomats occasionally write opinion pieces for local newspapers in host states, outlining positions on certain regional and bilateral issues. Surveying such content is useful in identifying which of those issues are deemed most important to Chinese diplomatic outreach in each country.

According to our analysis in Table 2, mitigating COVID-19 appears to be the overriding shared concern of last year. Other regional issues, like the conflicts in the South China Sea, and cooperation on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have remained pressing, however. The South China Sea is the PRC's top priority, in terms of diplomatic outreach, in claimant countries Malaysia and Vietnam, but also in Singapore, which is – like Indonesia - an active voice in supporting those claimants and keeping the dispute central to China-ASEAN engagements. As Sino-US relations become strained, particularly in the area of trade, Chinese embassies have sought to clarify Beijing's position among populations of countries that tend to be more supportive of the US, such as Vietnam and Singapore. In protecting China's image, diplomats have become known for using so-called "wolf warrior" tactics – responding aggressively to criticism through media channels. For example, when Thai politicians and citizens publicly questioned the

Table 2: Top 5 international and regional issues for Chinese diplomatic outreach



Source: Ranking as assessed by in-country researchers in 2021 based on diplomatic sources

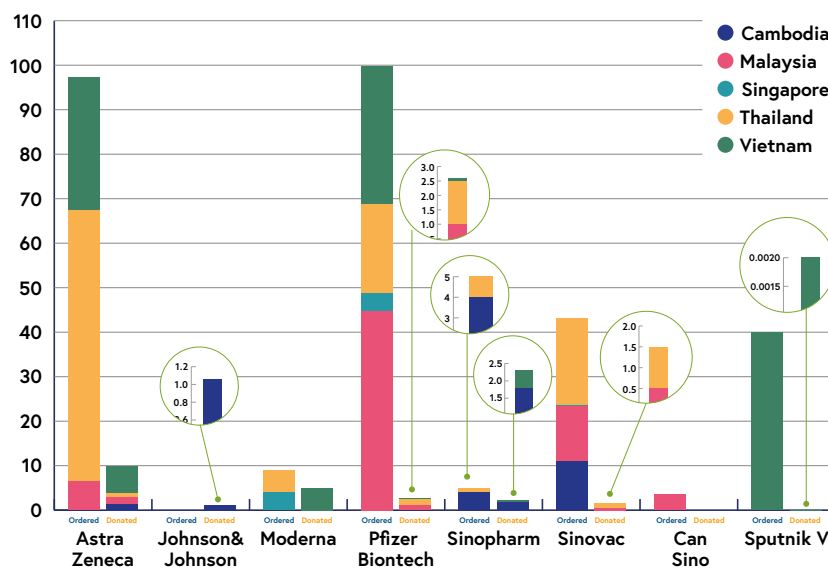
effectiveness of the Chinese-made Sinovac vaccine, the PRC embassy used its Facebook page to claim that such critics were undermining Beijing’s support of Thailand during the pandemic – positing the vaccine itself as a gesture of friendship between the two countries.⁹ When Bilahari Kausikan, a former senior diplomat from Singapore, remarked on the PRC’s apparent failure to inform other countries about the new, spreading virus in time to slow or prevent a global catastrophe, the Chinese embassy openly classed those comments as “no different from the stereotype cliché of Western anti-China voices.”¹⁰

“VACCINE DIPLOMACY”

After COVID-19 spread beyond its borders, China sought to position itself as a key problem-solver through the ensuing pandemic, with “vaccine diplomacy” becoming a key strand of its international relations. Focusing on developing

⁹ “Jab critics hurting ties, Chinese embassy says”, *Bangkok Post*, 5th September, 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2176483/jab-critics-hurting-ties-chinese-embassy-says>

¹⁰ “The Embassy Spokesperson’s comments on the article by Mr. Bilahari Kausikan”, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Singapore, 25th February 2020, http://sg.chineseembassy.org/eng/sgsd/202002/t20200225_1715356.htm

Figure 4: Vaccines acquisitions between January and July 2021 (in million doses)

Source: Data combined by in-country researchers until the end of July 2021 based on local ministerial and diplomatic sources as well as news articles

countries with negligible capacity to produce or acquire their own vaccines, China donated or sold over one billion doses of Sinovac, Sinopharm, or Can Sino to foreign recipients by September 2021.¹¹ Nonetheless, data from July 2021 (Figure 4) shows lower uptake for these vaccines than Western-origin alternatives such as AstraZeneca and Pfizer/BioNTech in the five selected countries of this study. Chinese brands got a head start in the early phase of vaccine rollout, supplying Sinovac and Sinopharm products in quite significant numbers to Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia. But in this same first half of 2021, except for Cambodia, all other countries ordered more vaccine shots from European or US competitors.

Moreover, the number of Chinese-donated vaccines to the countries in this study was lower than those donated by other nations in the same period. (Far greater volumes of the Chinese brands were exported, rather than donated.) As vaccine competition has escalated in the second half of 2021, China has increased its vaccine distribution and also expanded it into new territories, as have other nations, including Japan, the US, Australia, the UK, and various EU states.

¹¹ Josephine Ma, "Can China stay ahead as a leading exporter of COVID-19 vaccines", *South China Morning Post*, 21st September 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3149429/can-china-stay-ahead-leading-exporter-COVID-19-vaccines>

EDUCATION AND CULTURAL INFLUENCE

Dr. Céline-Agathe Caro



The Confucius Institute at Khon Kaen University, Thailand. The first Confucius Institute was inaugurated in Seoul in 2004. By the end of 2019, there were 550 such institutes and 1,172 Confucius Classrooms in 162 countries and regions, according to official sources.

Source: © Kewaree Sangsawang

This area of the study focused on three avenues of Chinese soft power: student exchanges in higher education, academic collaboration between universities and think tanks, and exposure to Chinese culture and the Mandarin language through local Chinese institutions.

While assessing China’s soft power projection in the fields of education and culture, it is important to keep in mind that geographic proximity and “blood lines” make China a naturally influential country in its Southeast Asian neighbours. Students from the five countries in this study go to university in Beijing or Shanghai because they are closer and cheaper than many other foreign destinations. The same holds true for Chinese students considering colleges in Thailand or Malaysia. For young people in the ASEAN region, there are obvious and potentially career-boosting benefits to learning Mandarin, and gaining a certain familiarity with Chinese culture. Moreover, Southeast Asian nations like Malaysia and Singapore have huge ethnic Chinese communities that retain strong links with the homeland, the culture, and the native language of their ancestors.

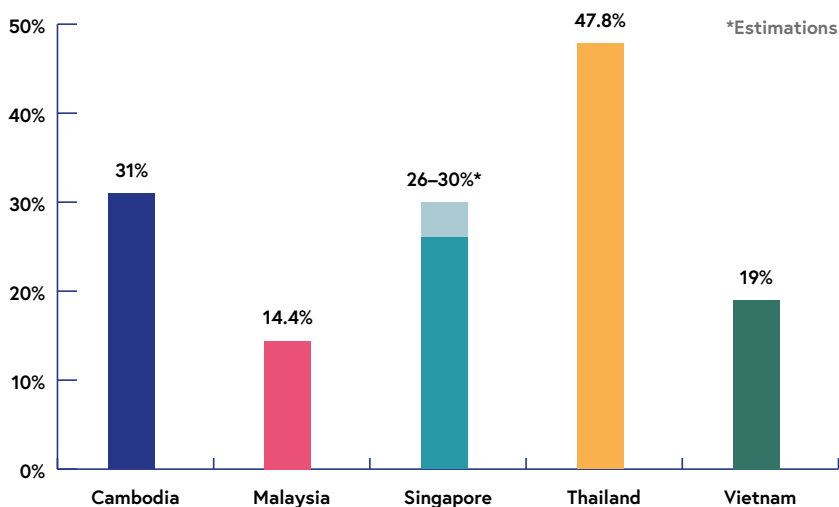
Nevertheless, this research shows that the Chinese government has developed a clear two-way strategy to increase its soft power through higher education and cultural institutions. At the domestic end, by hosting foreign students and academics, and at the foreign end by opening Chinese cultural institutions as well as promoting academic cooperation and securing college placements for Chinese students abroad. This observation is in line with the fact that in the 2000’s, the PRC’s leadership embraced the predominant view in Chinese intellectual circles that culture is the “core” resource of a state’s soft power.¹

STUDENT EXCHANGES

The researchers have found that academic exchanges between China and the selected five Southeast Asian countries are well developed in both directions and actively promoted by the Chinese government, especially through several key scholarship programmes.

¹ Bonnie S. Glaser and Melissa E. Murphy, „Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: The Ongoing Debate” in: Carola McGiffert (Ed.), *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States: Competition and Cooperation in the developing World*, CSIS, Washington, March 2009, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/soft-power-chinese-characteristics>

Figure 5: Percentage of Chinese students among all foreign students enrolled in higher education



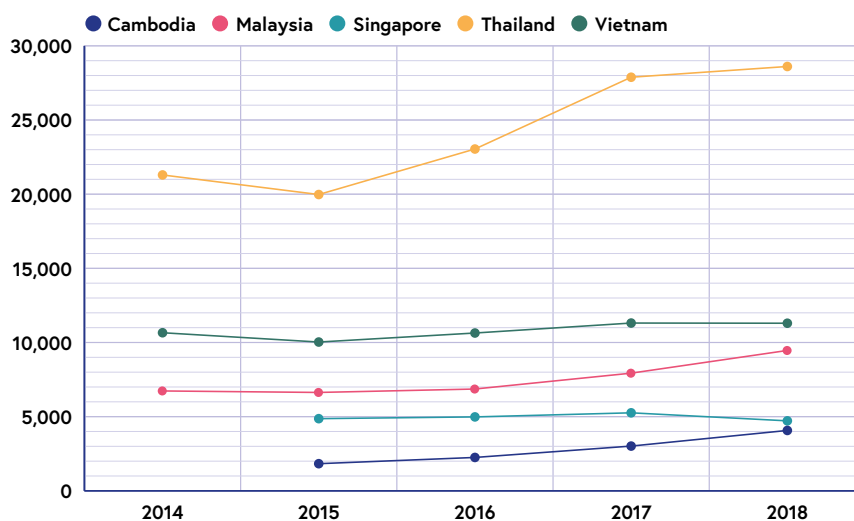
Source: Most recent data available combined by in-country researchers

The data for Cambodia and Malaysia is from 2019. The data for Thailand is from 2018. The data for Vietnam is from 2016 and the only available data for Singapore is from 2002.

Figure 5 shows a high percentage of Chinese students in all five countries through the years immediately preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, when measured against the overall number of foreign students. The largest share is seen in Thailand, where Chinese students accounted for 47.8 percent of all foreign students enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, training, and exchange programmes in 2018. Even in Malaysia, which had the lowest share among the chosen five ASEAN states, Chinese students still comprised the largest proportion of foreign enrolments. Along with Singapore and Thailand, Malaysia also participates regularly in the China Education Expo held every year since 2001 in several Chinese cities. These high-profile fairs offer some 30 countries the opportunity to promote their universities at national pavilions where they compete to attract the most promising Chinese students.²

² See China Education Expo, <https://www.chinaeducationexpo.com/english/>

Figure 6: Number of foreign students from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries in China



Source: Chinese Ministry of Education

The PRC now claims a capacity to host almost 500,000 foreign students per year³ across more than 2,000 universities and more than 5,000 programmes in English. That student population is drawn from around the world, with Beijing placing particular emphasis on attracting students from outside the most industrialised states. Against this backdrop, the flow of students from the five selected Southeast Asian countries was on average slightly growing in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic, as Figure 6 illustrates. Of these, Thailand sent the most students to China from 2014 to 2018, while hosting the highest proportion of Chinese students at its own universities. Nevertheless, other destinations have proven more popular than China with students from these five states, with greater numbers travelling to Australia, the US, Japan, the UK, and other European countries for their higher learning.⁴

³ See China Admissions, an online platform for international students funded by the Beijing City Government and Chinese universities, <https://www.china-admissions.com/study-in-china-guide-for-international-students/>

⁴ UNESCO, “Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students”, Institute of Statistics, 2021, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>

The Chinese government offers more than 50,000 scholarships per year to international students through different schemes and programmes – the China Scholarship Council (CSC), for example, operated by the Chinese Ministry of Education, Embassies, and Confucius Institutes. Foreign students can also apply for a scholarship provided by a university or a city in China, while many other options are made available through the private sector.⁵ For example, more than 10,000 Vietnamese citizens studied in China every year between 2014 and 2018 (see Figure 6). Among them, 2,000 received a scholarship from the PRC, according to Vietnam’s ambassador to China in 2017.⁶ China also grants scholarships to its citizens seeking a post-graduate education overseas, at Singapore Management University, for example, or the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok.

Newly-opened overseas branches of Chinese government-owned universities can be seen as part of a global outreach strategy in the field of education, and a means of competing with Western institutions, especially from the US, UK, and Australia. The first of these was established in Vientiane, Laos, in 2012. Xiamen University’s campus outside Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur was the first large-scale Chinese university to open its doors outside the PRC in 2015.⁷

In terms of soft power, these exchange programmes, scholarships, and overseas campuses help create people-to-people ties and foster a better understanding of China abroad. Southeast Asian students in China are well-placed to learn about the language, culture, history, economy, and public policies of the People’s Republic. An education at a Chinese university may also serve as an introduction to the PRC’s prevailing political views and priorities in domestic and international issues.

⁵ See China Admissions, https://www.china-admissions.com/blog/china-scholarship/#CCN_Scholarships

⁶ Zhang Zhangwei, Lu Yiwen, “China-Vietnam educational cooperation and exchanges under the “One Belt, One Road” (in Chinese), 2nd June 2017, FX361.com, <http://www.fx361.com/page/2017/0602/1848489.shtml>

⁷ Vincent Bevins, Tom Phillips, „‘Going global’: China exports soft power with first large-scale university in Malaysia”, *The Guardian*, 7th July 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/07/going-global-china-exports-soft-power-with-first-large-scale-university-in-malaysia>. For Suzhou University in Laos, see: <http://www.suda.edu.cn/eng/News/SoochowNews/201609/C73A57A6-5CCD-4979-BBCB-1E137DC1B805.html>. Xiamen University Malaysia: <http://www.xmu.edu.my/main.htm>

ACADEMIC COLLABORATION

China funds academic activities at universities and think tanks in the Southeast Asian states encompassed by this study. There are two main channels for such investment. First, PRC embassies and consulates regularly provide direct sponsorship and grants for conferences, seminars, and book purchases. Second, Beijing also supports activities indirectly through third parties – chiefly Chinese universities and research institutes. Evidence shows that sponsored events between 2014 and 2019 tended to focus on Chinese studies, bilateral relations, or priority issues of diplomatic outreach in the region (see Table 2).

Many college faculties and departments in the five Southeast Asian states and China have also signed agreements to facilitate collaborations. This academic cooperation takes various forms in myriad subjects, from Chinese studies to economics and engineering, and also provides access to exchange semesters, visiting programmes, or joint degrees for students on both sides. In October 2019, Singapore and the PRC established the first ever bilateral “Youth Interns Exchange Scheme” (YES) between China and an Asian country for students and recent graduates.⁸

The relevant Chinese authorities demonstrate an eagerness for young students from Southeast Asia to discover China, to interact with government officials and representatives of the private sector, and to network with peers from Chinese universities. For example, the Sino-Singapore Undergraduate Exchange (SSUE) Programme established in 2002 by both Ministries of Education (with four participating universities on each side) declares as a primary objective on its webpage: “to help [Singaporean] students gain a global perspective and a better understanding of China and its potential”.⁹

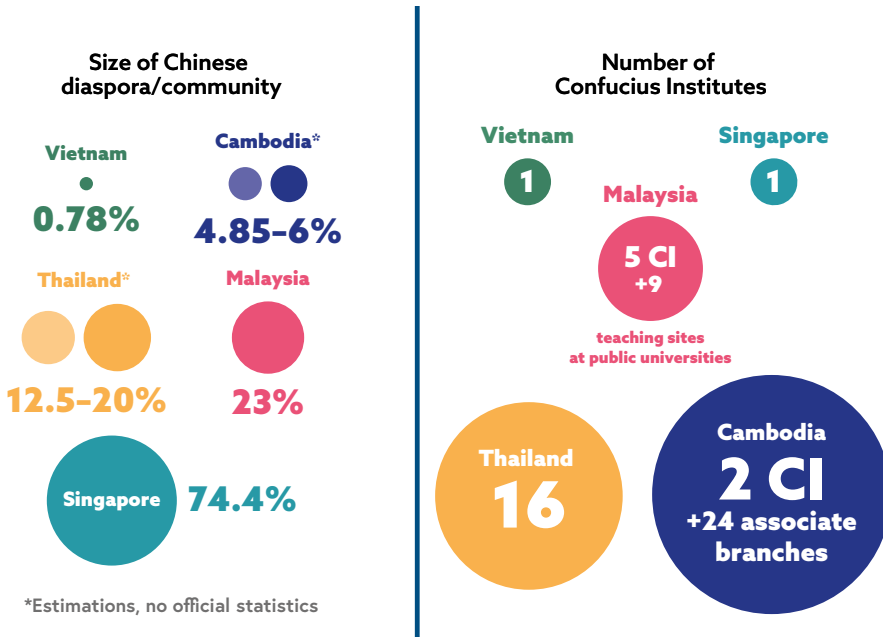
CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES AND CLASSROOMS

In 1987, the PRC established the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, affiliated with the Ministry of Education. Commonly known as “Hanban” and renamed in 2020 as the Centre for Language Education and

⁸ YES, Singapore-China Youth Interns Exchange Scheme: <https://www.yes.org.sg/>

⁹ See National University of Singapore, „Special Global Programmes“, 16th SSUE - China Programme. <https://www.nus.edu.sg/gro/global-programmes/special-global-programmes/outgoing-students-sino-singapore-undergraduate-exchange-ssue-programme>

Figure 7: Number of Confucius Institutes (CI) and size of Chinese diaspora



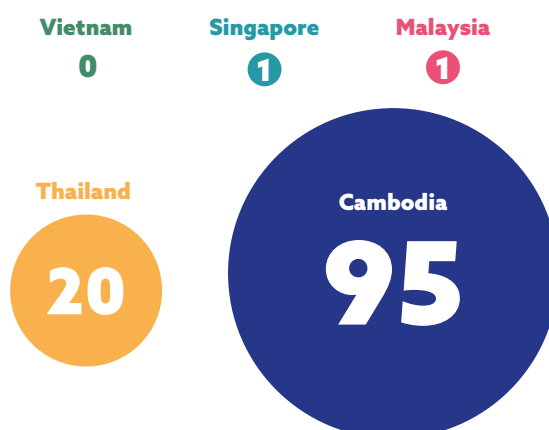
Source: Data combined by in-country researchers in 2021

Cooperation, the stated mission of this office is to promote Mandarin and Chinese culture around the world, primarily through Confucius Institutes (CI) and Confucius Classrooms (CC), as well as textbooks and other publications.

The first Confucius Institute was inaugurated in Seoul in 2004. By the end of 2019, there were 550 such institutes and 1,172 Confucius Classrooms in 162 countries and regions, according to official sources.¹⁰ There are also Chinese Cultural Centers (CCC) in many Southeast Asian states, including Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Cambodia.

Unlike Western counterparts such as the British Council, Germany's Goethe Institute, or the Alliance Française, Confucius Institutes are directly embedded in campuses of local universities and often supply the department of Chinese studies with staff and scholarships as well as teaching materials and support for cultural events.

¹⁰ See statistics provided by the Chinese International Education Foundation, <https://www.cief.org.cn/qq>

Figure 8: Number of Confucius Classrooms

Source: Data combined by in-country researchers in 2021

This research measured populations of Chinese descent against the number of Confucius Institutes (CI) and Classrooms (CC) in the five selected Southeast Asian countries, to better identify target groups of this soft power policy. Figures 7 and 8 illustrate that (except for Vietnam, with its often strained relationship with China – see Vietnam’s case study) there are clearly more Confucius Institutes, associate branches, and Confucius Classrooms in those states with a smaller ethnic-Chinese community. The fact that there are more extensive CI and CC networks in Cambodia and Thailand than Malaysia tends to suggest that the intended demographics of such institutions are not primarily persons of Chinese descent, but new audiences.

Singapore represents a special case – a city-state where almost three-quarters of the population is of Chinese descent. Very few Confucius Classrooms are active there, but some scholars regularly express concerns that the People’s Republic might instrumentalise local Chinese cultural institutions to gain influence, by playing upon existing affinities among Singaporean Chinese. Such fears have coalesced around certain focal points, as when China opened a new cultural centre in the city-state in 2017. A separate Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre was established by local authorities in a manner widely seen as a countermeasure.¹¹

¹¹ Amy Qin, “Worries Grow in Singapore Over China’s Calls to Help ‘Motherland’”, 5th August 2018, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/05/world/asia/singapore-china.html>. For the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC), see: <https://singaporeccc.org.sg/>

INFLUENCE IN THE MEDIA

Miriam Fischer



Matchon Group deputy director Parnbua Boonpan (L.) and Xinhua Bangkok bureau chief Ming Dajun (R.) during the announcement of the partnership between Khaosod (and two other publications from the Matchon Group) and China's Xinhua News Agency on 25th July 2019.

Source: © Khaosod

In evaluating China’s soft power, it is essential to consider media strategies. The PRC’s increasingly active role in global politics corresponds to more overt attempts to expand its influence over the politics, society, and news culture of other countries. Involvement, and even interference, in foreign reporting has become standard practice for the PRC, and it is common for China to enlist local influencers to support its official positions. Hence, the PRC leadership takes immense efforts to increasingly try to influence or even control how China is portrayed abroad, as part of a strategic effort to spread its own views around the world. From Beijing’s perspective, such tactics are justified by the need to counter a perceived Western dominance and bias across global media.

CHINESE STATE-RUN BROADCASTERS

China has its own television and radio stations broadcasting state-controlled content abroad. Founded in 1958, CCTV (China Central Television) is directly controlled by the propaganda department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and its programmes are inevitably friendly to the latter’s policies. The international division of CCTV, the China Global Television Network (CGTN), is effectively dedicated to reporting news from a CCP-approved perspective. The network is regularly accused of propagating disinformation on behalf of the Chinese government.¹ China Radio International (CRI), also state-owned,

Table 3: Chinese state-run broadcasters in local TV and satellite packages

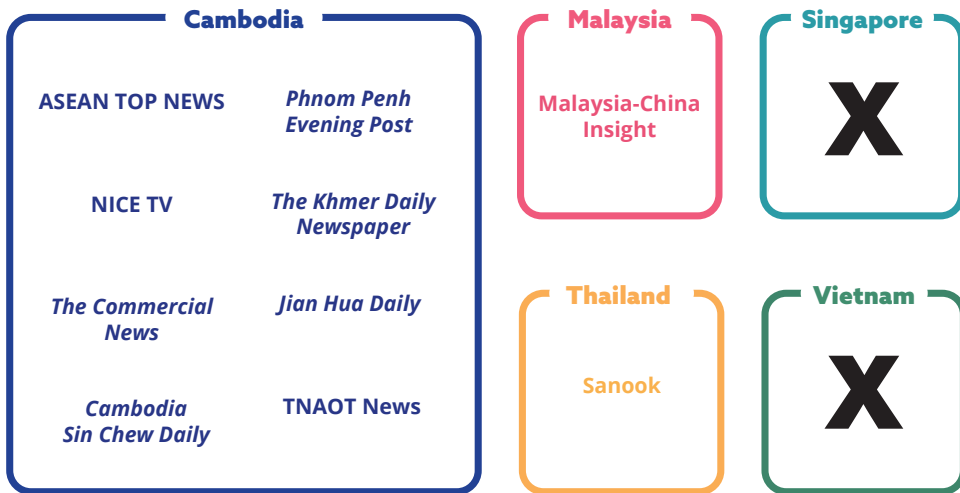
	Cambodia	Malaysia	Singapore	Thailand	Vietnam
CCTV	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES*
CGTN	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES*
CRI	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

*available via satellite only

Source: Data combined by in-country researchers in 2021

¹ “Six Ways Beijing Impacted Global Media and Triggered Push Back Last Month,” Freedom House, 1st April 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/six-ways-beijing-impacted-global-media-and-triggered-pushback-last-month>

Figure 9: Chinese acquisition or ownership of local media outlets



Source: Data combined by in-country researchers in 2021 based on available sources

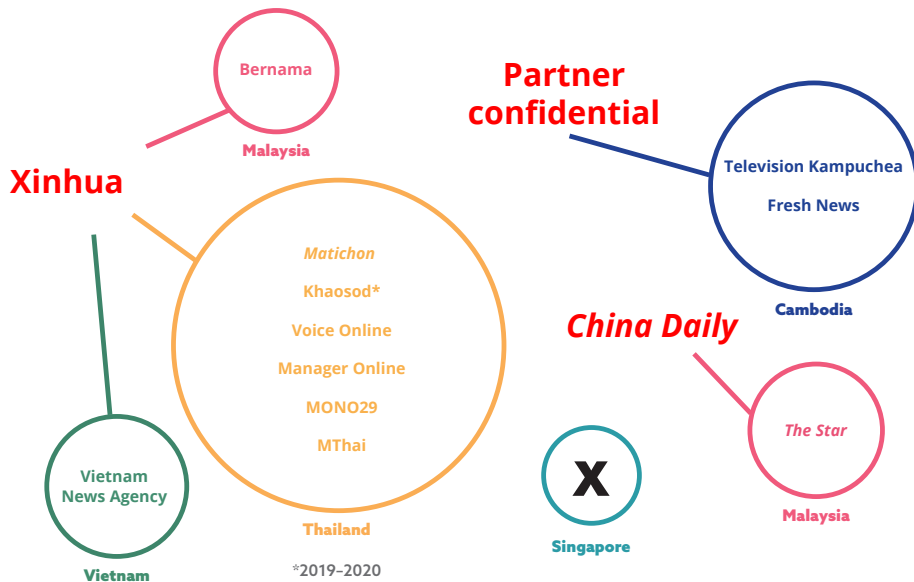
broadcasts news, current affairs, politics and economics programmes around the globe via the internet, satellites, and terrestrial stations.

For this study, researchers examined the operations of Chinese state-run media in the five selected Southeast Asian countries. As Table 3 illustrates, the above mentioned broadcasters are active, in some form, in all five. Some air programmes in local languages, thereby reaching out to the native populations with carefully curated, CCP-sanctioned viewpoints on local, regional, and international developments.

CHINESE OWNERSHIP OF LOCAL MEDIA

The expansion of Chinese state TV's international division, and its networks of foreign broadcasters and editors, can be seen as an amplified effort to influence perceptions overseas. Chinese private operators have increasingly become owners of, or active shareholders in, foreign media businesses. Figure 9 illustrates Chinese acquisitions or controlling interests in the local media outlets of the five chosen Southeast Asian countries. In Cambodia for example, this study

Figure 10: Content sharing agreements between Chinese news agencies and local news outlets/agencies



Source: Data combined by in-country researchers in 2021 based on available sources

counted that a total of eight news outlets are fully or partly owned by Chinese companies. It follows that such arrangements will have a powerful influence on coverage and perception of China in that country.

Figure 9 also shows that China clearly has a less developed media presence where the state controls national news outlets, such as Vietnam and Singapore. When traditional and digital media are subject to rigorous government oversight or operated to equivalent political/ideological purpose, or when countries have their own strong and resilient surveillance systems, China is then “shut out” to a greater or lesser degree.

CONTENT SHARING AGREEMENTS

Another strand of China’s strategy appears to be content sharing agreements between news companies. Figure 10 shows that China’s largest news agency,

Xinhua (founded by the CCP), has disclosed such agreements in three of the five selected countries, including Vietnam, with multiple contracts in Thailand. No information was made publicly available for contracts between Chinese agencies and Cambodia's Fresh News and Television Kampuchea, which remain confidential. The result is broad republication of content from several Chinese media outlets – not always with clear indications about the source of the information – with an obvious impact on editorial angles and consumer perspectives. *The Star* newspaper in Malaysia, for example, is thus understood to be “moderately pro-China”. Singapore is the only country in our study where we couldn't find any content-sharing agreement between local and Chinese news providers.

Leading news agencies in some of the selected countries are offered free access to the proprietorial content of Xinhua. Copy and images from other foreign news agencies, such as Reuters and Associated Press, carry standard fees for republication and distribution. This is another strategy China uses to propagate its views in the region.

EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES

The PRC also provides customised “training” for foreign journalists, media scholars, and executives, as another tactic in garnering positive coverage . Various bodies operate programmes for such training, which seem to focus on mainstream media. The China-Asia Pacific Press Centre Media Exchange Programme is one, with a remit to “promote cooperation between China and Southeast Asia”.

The in-country researchers preparing this study noted intense activity in the media field across all five nations under consideration, identifying agreements with local media agencies, associations and/or universities across the region, and especially in Cambodia, Malaysia, and Thailand. As a general pattern, participants are invited to China and introduced to high-ranking officials, academics, and representatives of media organisations closely affiliated to the Chinese Communist Party. Even Vietnam, which operates at a comparative remove from the PRC in other areas, permits and maintains exchange programmes for its national Association of Journalists.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Also evidenced in the research is a common practice of Chinese embassy staff using social media platforms to promote particular sanctioned messages. A guideline issued by the Cyberspace Administration of China in March 2020 encourages Chinese internet users and social media platforms to “present the true image of China to the world” and issue “correct portrayals” of the Chinese Communist Party.² In several of the five selected states, it was found that China systematically attempts to influence opinions via social media in this way.

² David Lenz, “China’s good netizens”, Mercator Institute for China Studies, 30th April, 2020, <https://merics.org/en/analysis/chinas-good-netizens>

ECONOMIC INFLUENCE

Isabel Weinger



Chinese tourists visit the Grand Palace in Bangkok on 4th September 2014. Chinese visitors constituted the largest share of international tourists in Cambodia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam in 2019.

Source: © Athit Perawongmetha, Reuters

As China expert David Shambaugh put it in 2015, the strongest driver of the PRC's soft power push is money.¹ Since the ASEAN–China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) was launched in 2002, China's share of ASEAN total merchandise trade increased from 8 percent in 2004 to 21 percent in 2018, making it ASEAN's biggest trading partner, according to economists at the Asian Development Bank. In 2017 China also became ASEAN's third largest source of FDI.² Other regional free trade agreements, such as RCEP, have the potential to intensify trade relations between China and ASEAN even further. A combination of infrastructure projects, regional FTAs, bilateral agreements, ODA (Official Development Assistance) and FDI tends to blur lines between economic strength and soft power. The countries surveyed for this project have shown different levels of dependency in their economic relationships with China.

NATIONAL TRENDS

In Cambodia for example, China is seen as the primary economic patron. Chinese investment in the country has provided vital capital for economic growth, particularly as regards funding for ongoing infrastructure projects.

Meanwhile, China appears to regard Malaysia as a potential springboard to the greater ASEAN market. Growing volumes of trade and investment suggest a deepening interdependence between the two economies, and Beijing clearly prefers that Malaysia remain an integral part of an Asia-based regional economic integration process such as with RCEP.

Vietnam and China share similar state ideologies and economic reform programmes, which help facilitate trade relations. Neither is inclined to comment on or interfere in the other's domestic affairs, especially with regard to human rights, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press.

¹ David Shambaugh, "China's Soft-Power Push. The Search for Respect", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2015, Volume 94, Number 4, p. 99–107, here p.100. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-16/chinas-soft-power-push>

² Jayant Menon and Anna Cassandra Melendez (ADB), "Upgrading the ASEAN–China Free Trade Agreement", East Asia Forum, 14th August 2019, [https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/08/14/upgrading-the-asean-china-free-trade-agreement/#:~:text=In%202015%2C%20ASEAN%20and%20China,Free%20Trade%20Area%20\(ACFTA\)](https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/08/14/upgrading-the-asean-china-free-trade-agreement/#:~:text=In%202015%2C%20ASEAN%20and%20China,Free%20Trade%20Area%20(ACFTA))

Singapore has assigned itself a “pathfinder” role in business engagements with China, a dynamic explicitly agreed-upon by both states in their joint declarations. In 2015, Singapore and China formally pledged to encourage and promote bilateral trade and investment through platforms such as the Investment Promotion Committee. Singapore also welcomes Chinese businesses to use the city-state as a base for internationalisation, and as a regional hub for Chinese projects in Southeast Asia.

Economic ties between China and Thailand have strengthened through gradually increased volumes of two-way trade, as well as FDI and tourism. Dependence on China has made the Thai government more sensitive to the question of how their country is regarded by Beijing and the Chinese general public, in large part because of potential economic fallout (tourism is particularly vulnerable).

To quantify China’s influence, this study focused on its contributions to the five surveyed countries in terms of economic development and investment between 2014 and 2019. Metrics included shares of two-way trade with China, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the volume of Chinese tourists travelling to this part of Southeast Asia.

All five states have China as their dominant trading partner, and all have recorded increasing levels of trade with the PRC in the years for which data was collated.

TWO-WAY TRADE WITH CHINA

Their respective shares of two way-trade with China in 2019 can be ranked as following, lowest to highest: Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. As per Table 4 those shares ranged from 13.4 to 24.5 percent in 2019. These states have also signed FTAs with other large economies, trading for example with India, Japan, and South Korea under the ASEAN framework. Singapore and Vietnam have a free-trade agreement with the European Union (EU), another vast market, while Malaysia and Thailand have been negotiating their own bilateral FTAs with the EU for several years. But economic ties to China remain vital for all five countries.

Table 4: Share of two-way trade with China compared with total international trade volume (in million USD)

Cambodia				Malaysia			Singapore		
	China	Proportion	Ranking	China	Proportion	Ranking	China	Proportion	Ranking
2014	4,067	24.6%	1st	63,545	14.3%	1st	99,142	12.5%	1st
2015	4,332	22.5%	1st	59,306	15.8%	1st	93,569	14.0%	1st
2016	5,160	23.0%	1st	58,059	16.2%	1st	84,845	13.5%	1st
2017	6,040	23.6%	1st	67,612	16.4%	1st	99,383	14.2%	1st
2018	6,999	23.2%	1st	77,730	16.7%	1st	100,030	12.8%	1st
2019	8,598	24.5%	1st	76,055	17.2%	1st	100,652	13.4%	1st

Thailand				Vietnam		
	China	Proportion	Ranking	China	Proportion	Ranking
2014	63,582	14.0%	1st	58,576	19.7%	1st
2015	64,797	15.5%	1st	66,009	20.1%	1st
2016	65,830	16.1%	1st	71,988	20.5%	1st
2017	73,745	16.1%	1st	93,927	21.9%	1st
2018	80,128	16.0%	1st	106,882	22.2%	1st
2019	73,861	16.4%	1st	117,020	22.6%	1st

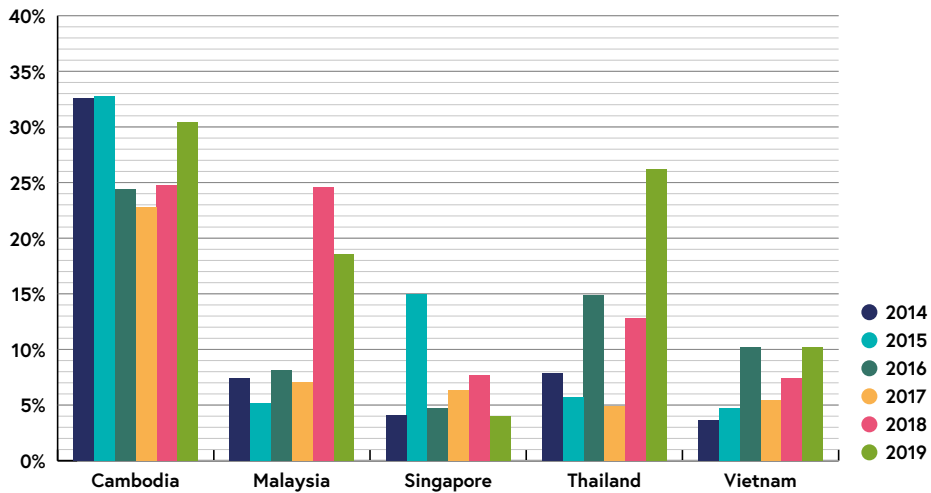
Source: World Bank

FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT

FDI figures show an even steeper development, as seen in Figure 11. While Chinese FDI (compared with the total FDI in each country) has remained at a steady level in Cambodia (32.6 percent in 2014 to 30.4 percent in 2019) and Singapore (4.1 percent in 2014, 4.0 percent in 2019), much sharper increases were recorded in Malaysia (7.4 percent in 2014 to 18.6 percent in 2019), Thailand (7.9 percent in 2014 to 26.2 percent in 2019) and Vietnam (3.6 percent in 2014 to 10.2 percent in 2019). As of 2019, China's Top 10 investments along the BRI route were in Singapore, Indonesia, Russia, Laos, Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, Kazakhstan, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia.³

³ ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Investment Report 2020–2021 – Investing in Industry 4.0*, Jakarta, September 2021, p. 49. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/AIR-2020-2021.pdf>

Figure 11: Share of FDI from China compared with total FDI (in percentage)



Source: Data combined by in-country researchers based on official sources

BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

The most well-known and debated appendage of China’s economic soft power project is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious plan for a transportation network linking Asia to Europe and Africa across multiple countries, while folding in other infrastructure projects to advance economic integration. BRI is presented as beneficial to all involved partners, connecting the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, as well as linking communities and cultures through economic initiatives and incentives. Southeast Asia forms one of the nexuses of this massive connectivity plan. BRI projects range from dam, road, and rail construction to special economic zones, including Cambodia’s Lower Se San 2 Dam and Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone, the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park, and the Vinh Tan 1 thermal power plant project in Vietnam (see Table 5).

High-speed rail is a core element of the BRI, hence China’s development of the East Coast Rail Link in Malaysia and the Bangkok-Nong Khai high-speed railway through Thailand towards Vientiane. The latter, like other BRI projects, has seen slow progress and numerous difficulties. There are no active BRI projects within Singapore, but the city-state cooperates with China on BRI projects in third countries. These efforts have strengthened economic relations between

Table 5: Most prominent BRI projects (approximate current value in million USD)

Cambodia			Singapore		
List	Value	Status	List	Value	Status
Lower Se San 2 Dam	800	Completed	None	None	None
Sihanouville Special Economic Zone	3,900	Ongoing almost half			
Phnom Penh-Sihanouville Expressway	2,000	Ongoing 70%			
NewSiem Reap International Airport	880	Ongoing 42%			
Malaysia			Thailand		
List	Value	Status	List	Value	Status
Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park	790	Completed	Bangkok-Nong Khai high-speed railway	5,500	Ongoing but slow progress
East Coast Rail Link	11,900	Ongoing one third			
Vietnam					
List	Value	Status			
Vinh Tan 1 thermal power plant	1,760	Completed			

Source: Data combined by in-country researchers in 2021 based on available sources

all parties. But the high money value of BRI projects also raises concerns of a possible “debt trap”: Countries with lower financial capacities may struggle to repay corresponding loans from China, and as creditor Beijing might effectively “buy” undue influence over these states’ behaviours and decisions.

TOURISM

Tourism has contributed significantly to the national GDP of the countries surveyed, with the exception of Singapore – values range from 14 to 20 percent. And with the exception of Malaysia,⁴ Chinese tourists constituted the largest share of international arrivals in 2019. Table 6 shows a rise in tourism from China by 6 percentage points in Malaysia, and by 23.6 percentage points in Cambodia, between 2014 and 2019. Tourism is a particularly vital income stream for the latter. When COVID-19 infection rates appeared to allow for loosening

⁴ Chester Chin, “Malaysia saw more tourists coming to Malaysia in 2019”, *The Star*, 27th April 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/travel/2020/04/27/small-tourist-arrivals-growth-to-malaysia-in-2019>

Table 6: Number and share of Chinese tourists compared with the total number of foreign tourists

	Cambodia		Malaysia		Singapore	
	Number	Proportion	Number	Proportion	Number	Proportion
2014	560,000	12.4%	1,610,000	5.9%	1,720,000	11.4%
2015	695,000	14.5%	1,670,000	6.5%	2,110,000	13.9%
2016	830,000	16.6%	2,120,000	7.9%	2,860,000	17.4%
2017	1,210,000	21.6%	2,280,000	8.8%	3,230,000	18.5%
2018	2,000,000	32.0%	2,940,000	11.3%	3,420,000	18.5%
2019	2,360,000	36.0%	3,110,000	11.9%	3,630,000	19.0%

	Thailand		Vietnam	
	Number	Proportion	Number	Proportion
2014	4,640,000	18.7%	1,950,000	24.7%
2015	7,940,000	26.5%	1,780,000	22.4%
2016	8,760,000	26.9%	2,700,000	26.9%
2017	9,810,000	27.5%	4,010,000	31.0%
2018	10,500,000	27.6%	4,970,000	32.0%
2019	11,000,000	27.5%	5,810,000	32.2%

Source: Data combined by in-country researchers based on official sources

restrictions in September 2021, Cambodia considered reopening the country for Chinese tourists first.⁵

To summarise: China is the number one trading partner of all five countries subject to this study, an important source of FDI, and the dominant source of foreign tourism. The PRC also funds and supplies technology for multiple infrastructure projects across the selected five Southeast Asian countries through and beyond BRI projects. Recent years have seen increases in all these contributions, alongside an attendant growth in Chinese economic influence.

⁵ Hin Pisei, "Chinese may be first in tourism revival: PM", *Phnom Penh Post*, 19th September 2021, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/chinese-may-be-first-tourism-revival-pm>

3

CASE STUDIES



CAMBODIA

KAS Office Cambodia¹



China's State Councilor Yang Jiechi (L.) shakes hands with Cambodia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Hor Namhong (R.) before a meeting at Cambodia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in Phnom Penh on 30th December 2014. Yang Jiechi is also the director of the general office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission of the CCP, among other official positions, and the highest-ranking diplomat in the PRC.

Source: © Stringer Cambodia, REUTERS

GOVERNANCE AND DIPLOMATIC INFLUENCE

As of 2020, Cambodia-China relations had entered a new stage in the shared history of both states, marked by intense strategic, economic, and cultural closeness. Its origins may be traced to the Bundung Conference of April 1955 – the first ordinary meeting between the late King Sihanouk and Premier Zou Enlai – and the official establishment of diplomatic relations in 1958. This laid the ground for an eventual “comprehensive strategic partnership”, formalised on 13th December 2010.

At a bilateral summit to commemorate 60 years of diplomatic relations, both sides declared that they were working toward “a Cambodia-China community of common destiny with strategic significance”. They avowed to maintain close high-level contacts, enhance the role of the inter-governmental coordination committee, liaise closely on defence and law enforcement, accelerate the implementation of the BRI, and combine efforts within the frameworks of the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC), ASEAN-China Cooperation, and other mechanisms. This led in 2019 to the co-signed Action Plan for Building the China-Cambodia Community of Common Destiny (2019–2023). This plan committed both nations to cooperating on political security, commerce, socio-cultural tourism, environmental action, and people-to-people exchanges. The apparent solidity of this partnership has caused some Western politicians, foreign pundits, and opposition parties to claim that Cambodian leaders have been “bought” by China. Some Cambodian academics argue that those critics fail to recognise the effectiveness of soft power as a concept appropriated from the West, and repurposed by China to its advantage in this case.

Which is to say, this close relationship did not develop organically. China has carefully planned its approach. Stability is key to Beijing’s long-term strategic interests, so it has favoured those elements of the Cambodian political elite that it deems likeliest to hold power for an extended period. In China’s analysis, the ruling Cambodia People’s Party (CPP), which has ruled since 1979, would remain the dominant political party,

Cambodia People’s Party

Cambodia People’s Party (CPP)’s president, Samdech Hun Sen has been the prime minister of Cambodia since 1985. The party occupies all seats in the National Assembly and most seats in the Senate since 2018.

¹ This case study was prepared by the KAS Office Cambodia, based on the data and the input of an in-country researcher who wishes to remain anonymous. (See methodology in the introduction.)

“ **Beijing’s embassy in Phnom Penh has been a coordinating hub for activities intended to socialise sympathetic Cambodian politicians and promote the benefits of the BRI as well as a spirit of ‘common destiny’.**”

but lacked legitimacy outside national borders. With this in mind, China withdrew support from the Royalist FUNCINPEC (which had cultivated ties with Taiwan), and explicitly backed the CPP by recognising the Hun Sen government after Prince Ranariddh was ousted in a bloody clash in 1997. This was followed by almost immediate overtures of friendship from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and increasingly cordial exchanges culminated in the party cooperation agreement signed in Beijing on 13th February 2006.

Party-to-party relations have since been “strengthened and consolidated” by many exchange visits between ranking members (64 from the CCP, and 60 from CPP between 2006 and 2020).² China has also intensified cooperation with (or co-optation of) Cambodia’s executive branch since July 1997, and at an accelerated pace since 2010, when both countries entered the comprehensive strategic partnership. By 2013, China overtook Japan as Cambodia’s biggest economic donor, by way of Official Development Assistance (ODA) and soft loans.³

The apparent bond between the two countries was further strengthened by two state and 22 official visits from China, while Cambodian PM Hun Sen travelled to China 19 times, and King Sihamoni 17 times between 1996 and 2021.⁴ At a parliamentary level, cooperation was enhanced through bilateral and multilateral frameworks established in January 2021. Leaders of the parliaments conducted sessions by video conference to affirm their mutual commitments on key topics including: 1) legislation for the conservation and protection of natural resources

² Aide-Memoire on CPP-CPC Cooperation (in Khmer), Commission for External Relations, the Cambodian People’s Party, 2021, p. 2.

³ Internal Documents, Cambodia Development Council, 2021, p. 4.

⁴ The visits for PM Hun Sen and King Sihamouni are tallied from 1996–2021, though PM Hun Sen was the second PM in 1996 and King Sihamouni’s coronation was held in 2004.

and environments; 2) mitigating the effects of COVID-19 3) economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic; and 4) regional and international issues. Taken together, the above developments have built political trust, assured strategic convergence, aligned governmental interests, and possibly contributed to the regime survivability of Cambodia's political elite.

Within this context, Beijing's embassy in Phnom Penh has been a coordinating hub for activities intended to socialise sympathetic Cambodian politicians and promote the benefits of the BRI as well as a spirit of "common destiny". Besides advocating for Chinese political values and development models, PRC diplomats have upheld the narrative of a mutually supportive relationship, backed Cambodia on issues related to its core interests and major concerns, and offered vocal reinforcement on matters of national dignity, sovereignty, and independence. For instance, Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed support for Prime Minister Hun Sen's strong measures against domestic media, and the arrests of his political rivals.⁵ The Chinese Embassy's official website and Facebook page, as well as PRC-owned and approved media sources, disseminate stories that emphasise Beijing's status as Cambodia's number one economic partner and biggest investor and donor, playing up BRI-derived infrastructure (3,000 km of new roads and 8 km of bridges throughout the country), and Chinese-supplied Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines.

EDUCATION AND CULTURAL INFLUENCE

China and Cambodia established a minimal academic exchange programme in 1998 (though the agreement to promote that exchange was not signed until late 2008), when the Chinese Ministry of Education, via the embassy in Phnom Penh, began to offer scholarship schemes to Cambodian students, with the support of the country's own Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS). By the end of 1999, MoEYS had sent 1,825 Cambodian nationals to study at universities throughout China.⁶ In the late 2000s, some Chinese provincial universities also offered a number of scholarships to members of the Union of Youth Federation of Cambodia (UYFC), and the youth wing of the ruling Cambodian People's Party

⁵ "China supports Cambodia's crackdown on political opposition", Reuters, 21st November 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-cambodia-politics-china-idCAKBN1DL01L-OCATP>

⁶ Report on Education Cooperation between Cambodia and China (in Khmer), Department of Scholarship, MoEYS, 2021, p. 2.

(CPP). In the same period, universities in Guangxi and Shanghai offered direct scholarships to Chinese Language Schools run by the Association of Khmer Chinese (AKC). Cambodia reciprocated with scholarship offers for Chinese students to study Khmer at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP).

Statistics from the Department of Scholarship of MoEYS in 2019 show that 103 Chinese students studied on scholarship at RUPP that year.⁷ Despite exchanges numbering in the thousands, China is not a popular option when set against Cambodian applications for other foreign scholarships such as MEXT (Japan), the Fulbright (US), the Chevenings (UK), or the Australian Awards. Since Xi Jinping's visit in 2016⁸ however, and the follow-up visit of the Chinese Director General of Scholarship in 2018, China has signalled an intention to expand its scholarship offers.

The Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban) seeks to attract different Cambodian demographics for Chinese language and cultural programmes. In 2009, the Confucius Institute (CI) at China's Jiu Jiang University partnered with the Royal Academy of Cambodia in offering Chinese language instruction to government officials, military, police forces, and adult university students. The first CI to do so, it has also opened associate branches in 24 provinces, enrolling some 15,000 students in free or partially free Chinese language programmes.⁹

Another CI, affiliated with Guilin Electronics University, partnered with the provincial university of Battambang in December 2019. Its stated goal is to teach Chinese to the general public in north-eastern Cambodia. The Confucius Institutes also provide assistance to the Chinese-language primary and secondary schools managed by the Association of Khmer Chinese (AKC). AKC operates 58 such schools nationwide with a total enrolment of 50,000 students. In the past years, CIs in China sent about 200 volunteers yearly to work with more than 1,000 local teachers.¹⁰

⁷ Statistics on Chinese Students Studying on the Government Scholarship in Cambodia (in Khmer), Department of Scholarship, MoEYS, 2019.

⁸ On the occasion of President Xi Jinping's visit in 2016, the PRC already offered 500 additional scholarships. See: Prak Chan Thul, "Chinese President Xi Jinping visits loyal friend Cambodia", 13th October 2016, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-cambodia-idUSKCN12D0NV>

⁹ Personal communication of the in-country researcher with the Confucius Institute, 20/05/2021.

¹⁰ Personal communication of the in-country researcher with the Association of Khmer Chinese, 05/05/2021.

Cambodian think-tankers and academics are often selected to join research exchanges with Chinese peers, in an attempt to influence public opinion and project a positive image of China. Cooperation is also common around publications and other academic activities. A case in point: the RUPP’s Cambodia 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Research Centre’s publication of “The Belt and Road Initiative: Implications for Cambodia’s Development” was launched by the Political Counsellor of the Chinese Embassy, Mrs. Zuo Wenxing, on 19th October 2019. The Royal Academy’s China Study Centre has signed 14 MoUs with Chinese think tanks and universities¹¹, conducting a number of projects and providing media interviews related to the BRI and Chinese investment in Cambodia. The Chinese Embassy has also funded a Study China Corner at the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI), while the Cambodia Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP) regularly arranges lectures, seminars, and workshops with assistance and input from Chinese think tanks. In addition, the Cambodian Asian Vision Institute (AVI) helped establish the Asian Cultural Council (ACC) in Siem Reap in 2018, which was in turn founded by the International Conference of Asian Political Parties (ICAPP) – in which the CPP and CCP occupy co-vice chair positions.¹²

“ The Confucius Institutes provide assistance to the Chinese-language primary and secondary schools managed by the Association of Khmer Chinese (AKC).”

¹¹ Personal communication of the in-country researcher with the Royal Academy of Cambodia, 25/05/2021.

¹² Ven Rathavong, “CPP to lead international party meetings,” *Khmer Times*, 17th May 2018, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/490640/cpp-to-lead-international-party-meetings/>

INFLUENCE IN THE MEDIA

The Cambodian government initiated a media crackdown in the period preceding the 2018 general election. English-language sources such as the *Cambodia Daily*, Voice of America (VOA), and Radio Free Asia (RFA) were largely displaced and forced to go digital. China sought to fill the resulting vacuum in Cambodia's information environment.

First, China's own media tailors content to appeal to Cambodian audiences. China Radio International (CRI) regularly reports in the Khmer language on local events likely to interest the general Cambodian listener. This is perhaps a unique provision, as Chinese state-run media elsewhere in Southeast Asia tends to be overwhelmingly Sino-centric.

Second, Chinese agencies issue content to Cambodian media outlets under sharing agreements that result in broad dissemination of articles from multiple Chinese sources, including Xinhua, *Global Times*, *People's Daily*, and CCTV/CGTN. CRI also formed a partnership with Cambodia's state-run radio station, RNK, to establish Cambodia-China Friendship Radio (CCFR).

“ Chinese agencies issue content to Cambodian media outlets under sharing agreements that result in broad dissemination of articles from multiple Chinese sources”

China Radio International (CRI)

China Radio International (CRI), founded in 1941, is under the control of the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party. Its overseas branches around the world broadcast in over 60 local languages. CRI started operating in Cambodia in 2008 and provides reports in Khmer language.

Third, China has invested in Cambodian media outlets. This includes mobile and multimedia platforms such as TNAOT News and ASEAN TOP NEWS, both of which frequently republish content sourced from Chinese state-controlled media – and both are inevitably regarded as pro-government. A Chinese investment group has also engaged in a joint venture with Cambodia's Interior Ministry to establish NICE TV.

Evidence suggests that Chinese-origin media is less popular than US-based equivalents. To use social media reach by way of comparison, VOA's Khmer Service Facebook page had 7,617,494 followers at time of writing, and RFA's Khmer page 7,292,264. Each of those figures exceeds those of all Chinese-sponsored and pro-government media outlets combined.

ECONOMIC INFLUENCE

The depth of the relationship between China and Cambodia is reflected in the sheer volume of trade and direct investment by the former in the latter. The value of Cambodia-to-China export has increased almost sixfold from about 62 million US dollars in 2013 to 369 million US dollars in 2020.¹³ The value of China-to-Cambodia imports increased about threefold in the same period, from 676 million US dollars in 2013 to 1,986 million US dollars in 2020.¹⁴

Chinese capital has been a crucial driver of Cambodian economic growth. Data from the Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC) records a total foreign direct investment (FDI) of 9.4 billion US dollars in 2019, with Chinese investment (3.7 billion US dollars) representing almost 40 percent of this amount, and making China the top foreign stakeholder in Cambodia.¹⁵ In 2020, Chinese FDI increased significantly to around 7.03 billion US dollars.¹⁶ A breakdown of the total Chinese FDI stock by economic sectors, as seen in Figure 12, shows the three with the largest share as: manufacturing (3.108 billion US dollars), real estate (1.078 billion US dollars), and agriculture (0.965 billion US dollars).

Adjusted internal documents from the CDC put the total value of Chinese investment in 2020 at an estimated 1,628 million US dollars, and investment in China-led infrastructure projects (including BRI) at about 586 million US dollars.¹⁷ The accumulated value of preceding/ongoing investments in infrastructure projects grew from just 50.21 million US dollars approx. in 2014 to 4.083 billion US dollars in 2020. If this trend goes on, Chinese financing of infrastructure will continue to play an essential role in Cambodia's long-term economic growth.

¹³ Data extracted from the National Bank of Cambodia, 2021, p. 2.

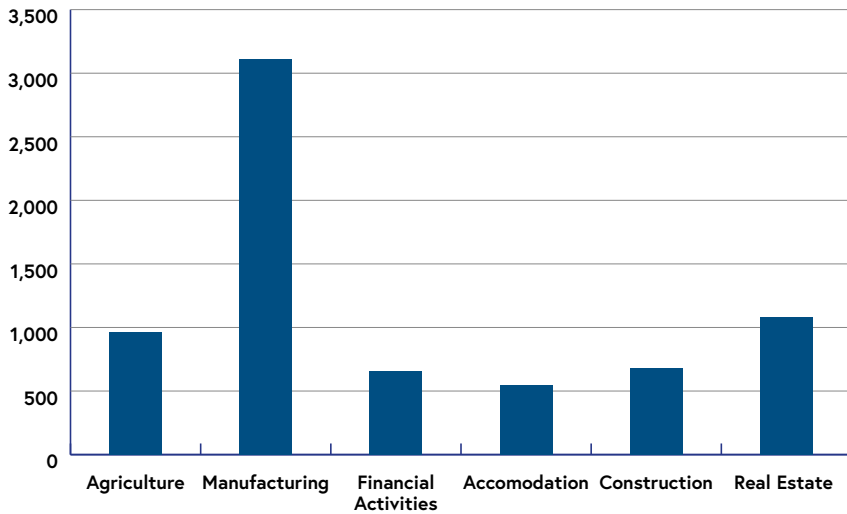
¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Data extracted from internal documents, Council for the Development of Cambodia, 2021, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

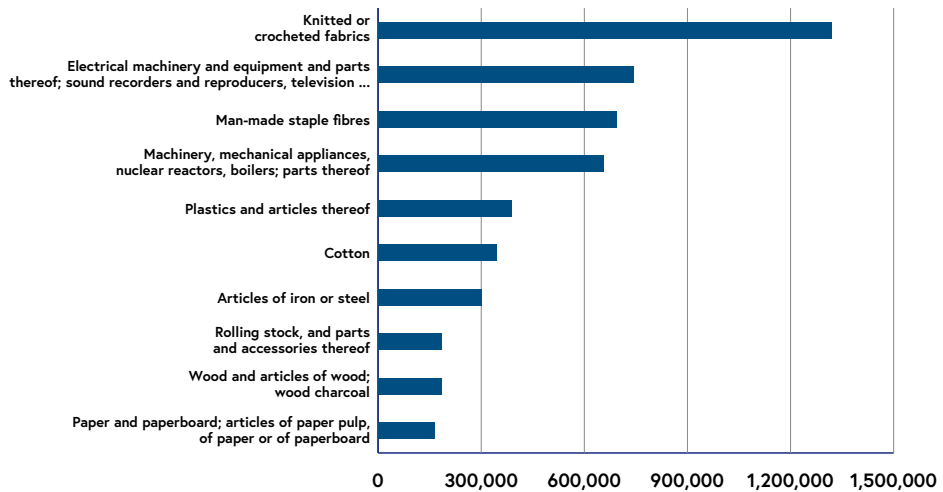
¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 3.

Figure 12: China FDI stock in the year 2020 (in million USD)



Source: National Bank of Cambodia, 2021

Figure 13: Top products imported from China by value (in thousand USD in 2020)



Source: Cambodian Ministry of Commerce, 2021

Trade statistics from Cambodia's Ministry of Commerce register a diverse range of Chinese-made goods. As shown in the Figure 13, the most commonly imported are knitted products, electrical machinery and equipment, man-made staple fibre, plastics, cotton, iron and steel, rolling stock, and wooden and paper products. The figure also suggests that essential parts of Cambodia's own manufacturing and exports depend on a supply of such products from China.

“ If this trend goes on, Chinese financing of infrastructure will continue to play an essential role in Cambodia's long-term economic growth.”

Workers and tourists also flow between Cambodia and China with much the same mobility as goods and capital. An estimated 300,000 Chinese migrants are now residents in Cambodia, according to the Association of Khmer Chinese (AKC). Chinese tourists also account for a large share of international arrivals, with cross-border passenger numbers growing from 694,712¹⁸ in 2015 to 2,361,849¹⁹ in 2019. Such massive, rapid growth suggests that ever-closer relations between the two states pays dividends into the service industry, and tourism has become a core source of income for Cambodia.

¹⁸ “Chinese tourists to Cambodia up 24 percent in 2015”, *China Daily*, 7th March 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2016-03/07/content_23770715.htm

¹⁹ “Chinese top tourist arrivals in 2019”, *Khmer Times*, 7th February 2020, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/688511/chinese-top-tourist-arrivals-in-2019/>

MALAYSIA

Dr. Ngeow Chow-Bing



Xiamen University Malaysia at night. The campus is located near Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It was the first large-scale overseas branch of a renowned Chinese university to open its doors outside the PRC in 2015.

Source: © voon yian khiam, Shutterstock

GOVERNANCE AND DIPLOMATIC INFLUENCE

Generally speaking, Malaysia and China enjoy friendly government-to-government relations. Before the pandemic, there were frequent visits by their respective top leaders, and many more by cabinet officials and subnational-level leaders (provincial leaders of China and state leaders of Malaysia). Malaysia sends more missions to China than any other country (one embassy and six consular missions, including one in Hong Kong), and it receives four from China – more than any nation except Indonesia (with five). These numbers illustrate robust exchanges between the two countries.

Official narratives from the Chinese Embassy stress the friendliness of bilateral relations and the benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is broadly well-regarded in Malaysia, so China's diplomatic positivity on the subject tends to find a receptive audience. There is also a more personal aspect of China's diplomacy: as a matter of respectful custom, every incoming Chinese Ambassador makes a public tribute to Tun Rahah, the widow of Tun Razak, the former Prime Minister who formed diplomatic ties with China in 1974 – a gesture deeply appreciated in Malaysia.

In recent years, Chinese ambassadors have also written several opinion pieces in mainstream newspapers defending Beijing's positions on Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the South China Sea issue. These are often framed in oppositional terms to the Western coverage of such potential flashpoints, which China tends to characterise as biased and unfair. Chinese officials have lately been more active, even proactive, on social media platforms with regard to these issues.

As to the question of whether China is exporting/promoting its political values, it is difficult to offer a decisive or definitive answer.

On the one hand, China does not explicitly advocate its own political values over Malaysia's prevailing democratic model, and tends to refrain from comment on topics like democracy, human rights, freedom – unless Beijing's core interests are touched upon (Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan, or China's own human rights record). On the other hand, it

“ The BRI is broadly well-regarded in Malaysia, so China's diplomatic positivity on the subject tends to find a receptive audience.”

is possible to discern a subtle, growing confidence in China's propounding its approach to "governance". That term itself seems to be emphasised by Beijing for sounding more technical than political, and by extension less ominous to those who may suspect Beijing of exporting its own values. For example, the Chinese Embassy hosted launch events for President Xi Jinping's book *Governance of China* in March 2021 and December 2021 (the latter for the Malay-language version of the book), which pointedly presented the Chinese leader's approach

to politics and government and celebrated China's achievements in alleviating poverty and advancing technology. This marked something of a departure from the embassy's usual practice, though China is demonstrably proud of its poverty reduction effort, and saying so at such events may be seen as the kind of "political value" it wants to spotlight to promote the legitimacy and achievements of its own system within Malaysia.

***The Governance of China* by Xi Jinping**

The Governance of China by Xi Jinping is a collection of Xi Jinping's speeches and writings published in three volumes in 2014, 2017, and 2020. The contents include Xi Jinping's autobiography and document his views on China's domestic politics, economics, military, international affairs, environment, and technology.

Party-to-party ties are another vital conduit of exchange. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has maintained relations, to varying degrees of closeness, with Malaysian parties across the political spectrum, but most substantially with the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a political party seeking to represent the Malaysian Chinese ethnicity that is part of the Barisan Nasional coalition (National Front in English). Before the general election of May 2018, the CCP and these parties ran party cadre exchange programmes where governance experiences were shared and discussed.¹ After the subsequent change of government, the CCP also reached out to the new governing parties. At least two of these, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP), have been invited to tour China by the International Department of the CCP. Such efforts suggest a new determination to share the Chinese philosophy of "governance."

Internationally, China and Malaysia seem closely aligned on certain issues. Both are strong proponents of a more Asia-based regional architecture. During

¹ Ngeow, Chow-Bing, "Barisan Nasional and the Chinese Communist Party: A Case Study in China's Party-based Diplomacy", *China Review*, 2017, 17: 1, p. 53-82.

the 1990s, the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad's proposal for an East Asian Economic Caucus was largely opposed across the region but not by China, which supported the idea. Both countries also favour regional trade integration. On the South China Sea issue, Malaysia is firm in protecting its own claims, without allowing the dispute to define its dealings with China. The issue is conspicuously ring-fenced from other aspects of bilateral relations, an approach that China seems to find agreeable. Malaysia is not eager to enter bilateral consultations with China on this issue, and remains firmly ASEAN-centered.

Given these friendly relations, party-to-party ties, and the non-controversy of China's promotion of its own governance approach, Beijing's level of governmental and diplomatic influence over Malaysia can be classified as moderate.

EDUCATION AND CULTURAL INFLUENCE

China's educational and cultural outreach must first be understood within the context of Malaysia's multi-ethnic society. Comprising 23 percent of the total Malaysian population, its ethnic Chinese community forms one of the largest such cohorts in the world. For decades, this community has built, supported, and maintained the most comprehensive Chinese vernacular education system outside of the mainland and Taiwan, ranging from kindergarten to tertiary level. As a result, the vast majority of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia are able to speak, read, and write in Chinese language, even without Beijing's assistance or outreach. This is a society already marked by a vibrant and robust Chinese cultural presence.

Malaysia's Chinese vernacular education system, however, operates in tension with the government. Malaysian Chinese educationists have long been known to fear that the ultimate goal of state legislators is to close down their schools. China's recent growth as an economic power has alleviated this fear significantly, as Malaysian authorities are increasingly aware of the importance of Mandarin as an academic subject. Hence, in-country Chinese educators tend to welcome the recent ascent of China. They work closely with Chinese education authorities and Chinese universities to find placements for graduates of Malaysia-based Chinese schools in Chinese universities. As a result, colleges in the PRC have now become a major destination for these graduates of Chinese schools who, in the past, had only limited options because public universities in Malaysia still don't recognise their diplomas. It should be noted that Taiwan remains a popular destination for these graduates as well.

Cultural diplomacy, in the form of Confucius Institutes (CI), is primarily directed towards non-Chinese speakers. The first CI in Malaysia was the Kong Zi Institute (KZI) established at the University of Malaya in 2005, using the *pinyin* name of Confucius. KZI is unique in being more than just a single CI – it operates nine teaching sites at other public universities throughout Peninsular Malaysia.² This allows for an outreach that extends far beyond cosmopolitan Kuala Lumpur,

The Confucius Institute (CI)

The Confucius Institute (CI) programme was launched by the PRC in 2004 to promote Chinese language and culture, and support Chinese teaching overseas. The institutes around the world cooperate with local colleges and universities which serve as host facilities and share operations costs.

into more Malay-dominant communities. Enrolments have also included smaller cohorts of government officials. Four further CIs were established between 2015 and 2020, the last two based in the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak respectively. Together, these five CIs cover almost every state of Malaysia.

In curricular terms, the CIs remain overwhelmingly focused on basic-level language, and introductions to

“soft” cultural subjects such as Chinese festivals, calligraphy, and so forth. Political or otherwise sensitive topics are largely avoided. In general, the presence of CIs in Malaysia does not generate controversies as in Western countries. There are latent objections to the CIs, however, within the country’s sensitive multicultural milieu. Certain ethno-nationalistic voices argue that CIs are “too Chinese” and therefore not welcome on Malaysian university campuses.³

The Chinese student population in Malaysia is also growing rapidly, and there are “push” and “pull” factors involved. As relations deteriorate between Beijing and Western governments, many young Chinese are exploring alternatives, and a certain proportion find Malaysia attractive and affordable. The government of Malaysia has also been trying to establish their state as a Southeast Asian “higher education hub”, hence a practice of admitting greater numbers of foreign students. Between 2015 and 2019, students from the PRC became the largest group among those enrolments, constituting about 14.37 percent of all

² Kong Zi Institute, University of Malaya, “Annual Report 2018”, 2019, p.14–15. <http://www.kongzium.edu.my/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Attachment-4.pdf>

³ Interview of the author with a university’s dean who oversaw the establishment of his university’s Confucius Institute, 2020.

foreign nationals in Malaysia's higher education system.⁴ Short-term fluctuations notwithstanding, this trend will likely continue, as the "push" and "pull" factors outlined above proceed to work their effects.

The PRC's Malaysian embassy funds and organises conferences at universities and think tanks, as well as at least one research project (disclosure: the author of this case study works at the Institute of China Studies at the University of Malaya, and from 2015 to 2019 this institute received funding from the embassy for organising several conferences and for book purchases). Xiamen University Malaysia may be considered a successful exemplar of China's soft power in the higher education sector in Malaysia – the first large-scale overseas branch of a renowned Chinese university, at a time when most international campuses around the world are extensions of high-profile Western colleges. It offers a wide range of subject matters, teaches most of its courses in English, and has attracted a large and cosmopolitan student body (4,560 students from 26 countries as of 2019).⁵

“ Cultural diplomacy, in the form of Confucius Institutes (CI), is primarily directed towards non-Chinese speakers.”

Overall, we can say that the PRC shows a moderate ability to shape public opinion through cultural and academic exchanges. There's a tradition of solid support within Malaysia for such exchanges, and Chinese outreach tends to be more welcome than not. However, there are too many variables at play to make firm statements on the question of whether these activities directly engender a more favourable local perception of China.

⁴ Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, various years.

⁵ Ngeow, Chow-Bing, "China's Universities Go To Southeast Asia: Transnational Knowledge Transfer, Soft Power, Sharp Power", *The China Review*, 2022, 22: 1, p. 236–239.

INFLUENCE IN THE MEDIA

Malaysia's multilingual environment creates another highly particular context for China's media presence, which is felt in different ways across Chinese, Malay, and English-language news outlets.

The English-language program of China Global Television Network (CGTN) is available through Astro (Malaysia's dominant pay-for-service satellite television company), along with a host of other English news channels, such as CNN and BBC. There are no viewing figures available for CGTN in Malaysia, so it's difficult to ascertain the network's popularity. The researcher's own anecdotal impression over the years is that CGTN is seen as reasonably credible, providing a valuable alternative perspective to the aforementioned Western networks.

Turning to English-language print media, *The Star* newspaper has the highest circulation. Owned by Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the political party seeking to represent the Malaysian Chinese community, it maintains a cooperative relationship with *China Daily* (an English newspaper published in China, owned by the Chinese Communist Party). Until December 2021, every Friday, a pull-out edition of the *China Daily* was inserted in *The Star*, which also regularly carries stories sourced from *China Daily* or *Xinhua* within its foreign news coverage. On balance, *The Star* can be described as moderately pro-China in its news reporting, features, and opinion pieces. Its editorial angles do not necessarily read as anti-West, or anti-US, however.

In terms of Chinese-language media, citizens in Malaysia can watch many Chinese and/or pro-China television news channels through Astro, including CCTV4, CTI (Taiwan), and Phoenix TV (Hong Kong). Unlike the English news channels also available through Astro, there are no China-sceptic Malay-language news channels on that platform. Put simply, all Chinese-speaking news channels broadcast through Astro are either China-based or editorially pro-China. This has been the case since Astro started transmitting two decades ago.

For print media, the biggest player in Malaysian is Media Chinese International

China Global Television Network (CGTN)

China Global Television Network or CGTN is an international cable TV news service controlled by the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party. Its official website asserts that CGTN "brings a Chinese perspective to global news".

(MCI), a Chinese language media platform owned by Tiong Hiew King, a tycoon of Chinese descent from the state of Sarawak on Borneo Island, and his family (Tiong's business empire is the Rimpunan Hijau Group, which is also a stakeholder in the China-Malaysia Qinzhou Industrial Park). MCI owns four of the largest Chinese-language newspapers in Malaysia, including the most influential, *Sinchew Daily*. The editorial perspective of that paper is, on balance, similar to that of *The Star* – moderately pro-China. *Sinchew Daily* is also a member of the China-organised World Chinese Media Alliance, and regularly participates in that body's activities. MCI itself is a listed company in Hong Kong, where its major newspaper, *Ming Pao*, is a well-established centrist organ, while its current affairs magazine *Yazhou Zhoukan* (Asia Weekly) is broadly seen as pro-China. *Yazhou Zhoukan* is widely available in Malaysia, as one of the few long-running current affairs magazines published in the Chinese language (comparable to *Time* magazine in English). The moderately pro-China positions of *The Star* and *Sinchew Daily*, however, are not necessarily products of pressure or interference from Beijing, but rather reflections of their owners' politics, and the corporate/journalistic culture(s) in which they are produced.

As for Malay media, the major conduit for PRC influence is Radio Antarabangsa China (or China Radio International Malay Station, aka CRI Malay). The effect is less evident in its terrestrial radio programmes (often produced in tandem with Radio Bernama, the national news agency) than on its webpage – the only

Malay-language online news site operated from China. This serves as a direct means of disseminating Beijing-approved information and opinion to the Malay-reading public (there are no Malay equivalents of *China Daily* or CGTN and no Malay-language publications cooperate with Chinese media in the same way as *The Star* or *Sinchew Daily*). Figures are not available on website traffic, but CRI Malay's Facebook account has more than 720,000 followers.⁶

“ Put simply, all Chinese-speaking news channels broadcast through Astro are either China-based or editorially pro-China.”

Moreover, the most prominent Chinese personalities on Malay social media are Husna Liang and Satria Zhang, both of whom speak fluent Malay, and engage

⁶ See CRI Malay's Facebook account, <https://www.facebook.com/crimalay/>

with the Malay-speaking community directly through Facebook and Youtube. Husna Liang shares “soft” topics, introducing Chinese culture (including Muslim life and cultures in China in general, and in Xinjiang in particular), without engaging in controversial issues. Satria Zhang focuses on more current affairs and politics, and presents China’s perspectives in his Facebook postings.

China has no obvious sway over online news media in Malaysia, like Malaysiakini, Free Malaysia Today, and The Vibes, which tend to be more critical of China than mainstream terrestrial broadcasters and print outlets. However, these digital news sites are very much focused on domestic affairs and cover China-related news only sporadically.

China offers a number of training programmes for journalists and media executives from various bodies. They are almost exclusively geared toward mainstream papers and broadcasters (*Bernama*, *Sinchew Daily*), as opposed to online, alternative media. Most are one or two-week courses consisting of lectures and visits.

Chinese social media apps WeChat and TikTok are hugely popular within Malaysia. TikTok reports four million registered users, and WeChat a massive 20 million. The activities and purposes of those users are so varied and diffuse as to defy analysis within the scope of this study. Overall, China may be seen as having a moderately influential (social) media presence in the country.

ECONOMIC INFLUENCE

Bilateral trade is critical to economic ties between Malaysia and China. Since 2009, the PRC has become Malaysia’s largest trading partner, while Malaysia was China’s largest, among ASEAN countries, until Vietnam surpassed it in 2018. Data supplied by the Malaysian Ministry of International Trade and Industry⁷ shows that from 2014 to 2020, the volume of Malaysia-China bilateral trade increased from 207.85 billion RM (Malaysian ringgit) to 331.44 billion RM, and from 15.8 percent of total trade volume to 18.6 percent. China remained Malaysia’s largest importer through these years, and has mostly constituted Malaysia’s largest export market in the same period (alternating with Singapore in certain years).

⁷ Ministry of International Trade and Industry, Report, 2015–2020, <https://www.miti.gov.my/index.php/pages/view/1771?mid=72>

Malaysia ran at a deficit of 12.99 billion RM in trade with China in 2020, according to latest report of the Malaysian Ministry of International Trade and Industry.⁸

Malaysia primarily exports to China electrical and electronic equipment, refined petroleum products, machinery, palm oil, chemicals and chemical products, and rubber products. Key imports from China include many items within the same categories: electrical and electronics, machinery, appliances, furniture, textiles, chemicals and chemical products. The overlap of imported and exported goods testifies to the growing phenomenon of intra-industry trade within the global supply chain.

Being a vastly larger economy, China had invested less in Malaysia than vice versa, until that paradigm began to shift in the 2010s. According to the Malaysia Investment Performance Report for 2015–2019, published by the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA)⁹, China has been the largest contributor of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the country's manufacturing sector since 2016. This is significant because Malaysia emphasises manufacturing in particular as a development strategy. The nature of that investment is also diverse, encompassing solar panels, textiles, steel, automotive, glass, and others.

Chinese investment in the service and primary sectors is more difficult to quantify, as Malaysia's government agencies do not track such data. But what is known is that during Najib Abdul Razak's premiership (2009–2018), Chinese real estate and construction companies were notably active, initiating some of the largest property development projects ever known in Malaysia. Forest City, for example – a massive real estate project in the state of Johore, undertaken by a major Chinese developer. Catering to the Chinese market and other foreign buyers, that project has added negligible value to adjoining communities. The succeeding governments, however, have been less welcoming of such developers, and instead favoured Chinese investment in manufacturing.

Malaysia has supported the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since the plan was announced in 2013. Then-Prime Minister Najib welcomed the initiative and in fact, most of the major China-led infrastructure projects were approved during

⁸ Ministry of International Trade and Industry, Report, 2020, p. 149, https://www.miti.gov.my/miti/resources/MITI%20Report/MITI_R2020_web.pdf

⁹ Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA), Malaysia Investment Performance Report, 2015–2019, <https://www.mida.gov.my/report/>

his tenure. Subsequent governments have remained broadly supportive through certain disagreements, and despite the cancellation of some projects deemed “dubious” or “ill-designed”. As of 2021, the two most prominent BRI projects are the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) and the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP). Eighty-five percent of the cost of ECRL is financed by Chinese loan. The exact loan amount was never disclosed but, based on the current cost estimation of 50 billion RM for ECRL (which has been revised and renegotiated twice in 2019 and 2021),¹⁰ the loan could approximately amount to 42.5 billion RM. Chinese company CCCC is the principal contractor, with a requirement to subcontract 40 percent of the construction work to local firms.¹¹ Moreover, the operation of the rail will be a 50–50 joint venture between China and Malaysia.

“ China prefers to see Malaysia remaining an integral part of Asia-based economic integration processes such as RCEP.”

Responsibility for MCKIP, meanwhile – an industrial park development intended to attract manufacturing investment – is shared 51–49 percent (in Malaysia’s favour).¹² Chinese company Guangxi Beibu International Port Group assumes a key

role in both the MCKIP and the related expansion of nearby Kuantan port. These projects are seen as opportunities to integrate and modernise the underdeveloped east coast of the Malay Peninsula.

Available data does not allow for a complete picture of the “brand power” of Chinese companies in Malaysia, but they appear to lag behind Western/Japanese/Korean competitors. A few are notably successful, particularly Huawei in the technology sector.

Tourist numbers from China doubled between 2014 and 2019 (to around 3 million).¹³ At time of writing, the PRC is the third-largest source of tourism to Malaysia, and the largest outside of ASEAN. However, Malaysia is not overly

¹⁰ BRI Monitor: East Coast Rail Link, 2021, https://www.brimonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CS_ECRL.pdf

¹¹ MRL (Malaysia Rail Link), *FAQs on East Coast Rail Link*, 2019, <http://www.mrl.com.my/en/faq/>

¹² Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park, 2017, <https://www.mckip.com.my/13/>

¹³ My Tourism data, 2016–2019, http://mytourismdata.tourism.gov.my/?page_id=860

dependent on China, and successive governments have sought to attract more Chinese tourists.

The numbers of Chinese labourers in Malaysia remain relatively low.¹⁴ Most are in-country on a short-term basis for construction work, while Chinese investors favour a localisation strategy. Standard practice is to rely on Chinese labourers in early phases of construction, while local counterparts are given sufficient training to take over.

China's overall economic strategy in Malaysia is not based on resource extraction or technology-acquisition. PRC investment tends to position Malaysia as a potential springboard to the greater ASEAN market. Growing volumes of trade and investment suggest a deepening inter-dependence between the two economies. China prefers to see Malaysia remaining an integral part of Asia-based economic integration processes such as RCEP.

¹⁴ Ida Lim, "Are fears over China's citizens in Malaysia justified? What the numbers tell us.", *The Malay Mail*, 22nd January 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/01/22/are-fears-over-chinas-citizens-in-malaysia-justified-what-the-numbers-tell/1830360>

SINGAPORE

KAS Regional Programme Political Dialogue Asia, Singapore¹



The state's own Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre – an 11-storey building in the heart of the financial district – is widely seen as a reminder that local Chinese culture is different from China's.

Source: © Architecture and Interior, Alamy Stock Photo

GOVERNANCE AND DIPLOMATIC INFLUENCE

Singapore has been a major focal point for China in ASEAN and beyond for several decades. On the one hand, Singapore's successful development path of economic modernisation during de-facto one party rule provides an alternative to modernisation theory's main tenet of democratic development following economic success. The People's Action Party's (PAP) resilience, its popular support, as well as its approach to governance buoyed by economic success have long been observed and studied by the CCP, not least to draw lessons for their own political system at home.² On the other hand, with the vast majority of Singapore's population being ethnic Chinese and a significant amount of ethnic Chinese foreign nationals on top of that, cultural similarities and affiliations are widespread. Since Deng Xiaoping's opening and reform period in the 1980's, and in particular since the formal establishment of diplomatic relations in 1990, the two states have enjoyed a close relationship politically. President Xi Jinping for instance visited Singapore many times, including long before he rose to his current position or even the Politburo. He visited in 1993, then a CCP secretary in Fujian province, and again in 2010, then PRC Vice President, notably right after his appointment also as Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Communist Party of China Central Committee (CPCCC). Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong noticed this significant signal and remarked at the time: "That Singapore is the first country to be visited after [Vice President Xi's] appointment as Vice Chairman of the CMC reflects the importance Vice President Xi attaches to Singapore-China relations".³ Three years prior, Xi's first meeting with any foreign leader since his promotion to the Politburo Standing Committee was with Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew. Part of their discussions were training of civil servants and so-called "Meet The People" sessions that were seen as relevant to the PAP's support in the city state.⁴

¹ This case study was prepared by the KAS Regional Programme Political Dialogue Asia in Singapore, based on the data and input of an in-country researcher who wishes to remain anonymous. (See methodology in the introduction.)

² See S. Ortmann & M. Thompson, "Introduction: The 'Singapore model' and China's Neo-Authoritarian Dream", *The China Quarterly*, 2018, 236, p. 930–945.

³ "Speech By Mr Goh Chok Tong, Senior Minister, At The Lunch Hosted For PRC Vice President Xi Jinping By The Singapore Chinese Chamber Of Commerce & Industry And Business China, 15 November 2010, 12:30 Pm At St Regis Hotel". Available at: <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/20101122002.htm>.

⁴ See Simon Elegant, "China's Nelson Mandela", *Time*, 19th November 2007. https://world.time.com/2007/11/19/chinas_nelson_mandela/. See also: Esther Teo, "Mr Lee Kuan Yew fostered region's ties with world: Xi", *The Straits Times*, 29th March 2015, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mr-lee-kuan-yew-fostered-regions-ties-with-world-xi>.



Foreign influences cannot easily penetrate Singapore's social fabric or hyper-vigilant internal security apparatus."

Since then, and within this context, Chinese officials have made many more visits and are scrupulously observant of protocols, and respectful of their hosts' priorities. Visits by elite CCP members⁵ tend to reflect Singapore's value and importance, as officials continue to share and gather information about developments in ASEAN and other regional affairs, while fostering familiarity with decision-makers from Singapore's ruling People's Action Party.⁶

Thanks to its rapid economic growth, China has been able to offer itself to Southeast Asia and Singapore as an additional (so to say "Plus One") market, designed to counterbalance, and ideally reduce the region's reliance on the West, especially in terms of consumer markets.

As regards cooperation on security, China is interested in confidence-building measures (CBMs) with Singapore, thus expanding its relationship with the city state beyond the perimeters of business and trade. In 2019, both countries upgraded a defence agreement leading to more high-level dialogues and larger-scale military exercises of army, navy and air force.⁷ In 2021 for example, joint maritime exercises between the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and People's

⁵ They included: State Councilor Yang Jiechi (28th-30th Aug 2014/Aug 2020 as Director of Office of Central Commission for Foreign Affairs), Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli (14th Oct 2015), President Xi Jinping/Yang Jiechi (6th-7th Nov 2015). The list also includes: Premier Li Keqiang (2016/12th-16th Nov 2018), Political Bureau member/ Minister of Organisation Department of CCP Central Committee Zhao Leji (15th-17th May 2017), Vice Minister of Justice Xiong Xuanguo (8th-10th May 2019).

⁶ Justin Ong, "PAP-CCP ties have greatly benefited people of S'pore, China: Lee Hsien Loong", *The Straits Times*, 30th June 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/pap-ccp-ties-have-greatly-benefited-people-of-spore-china-lee-hsien-loong>

⁷ "Singapore, China sign defence agreement to scale up army, navy exercises, establish regular dialogue", *Today Online*, 21st October 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/singapore-china-sign-defence-agreement-scale-army-navy-exercises-establish-regular>

Liberation Army (PLA) in the South China Sea were held and promoted by Chinese state media as peaceful naval manoeuvres, and editorially contrasted with purportedly aggressive displays of Western military strength.⁸ For Chinese personnel, to interact with counterparts from the SAF is to work with the best-equipped, most sophisticated military in Southeast Asia. (Most of Singapore's armaments were purchased from the West, and from the US in particular.)

Foreign influences cannot easily penetrate Singapore's social fabric or hyper-vigilant internal security apparatus. It is a small city-state with extensive surveillance networks, highly trained police forces and uniformed groups, low levels of corruption (and a powerful anti-corruption watchdog), and well-paid civil servants and politicians, all operating under a uniquely coherent system with a reputation for good governance. This is not to say that infiltration is unheard-of. Consider the case of Huang Jing, an American academic born in China accused of espionage while teaching at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.⁹ He was expelled and permanently banned from the country in 2017, but the Singapore government declined to publicly identify any foreign state as suspected of commissioning Huang's alleged activities.

EDUCATION AND CULTURAL INFLUENCE

People-to-people exchanges between China and Singapore occur across several sectors. Academic exchange programmes are either government-organised or arranged directly by universities. Special Global Programmes at the National University of Singapore (NUS), for example, are intended to give Singaporean students a better understanding of China while introducing Chinese students to Singaporean life and culture. The broader aim is to have these students become informal ambassadors for their respective states, and strengthen bilateral ties through their interactions.¹⁰ In 2019, over 20,000 alumni of Nanyang Technological University (NTU) held important positions in the PRC, giving NTU

⁸ Guo Yuandan, "China and Singapore conduct joint naval exercise in South China Sea to 'address risks'", *Global Times*, 25th February 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1216628.shtml>

⁹ Huang Jing, "Chinese-American academic expelled by Singapore is working in Beijing and has 'no hard feelings'", *Today Online*, 19 June 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/huang-jing-chinese-american-academic-expelled-singapore-working-beijing-and-has-no-hard>

¹⁰ National University of Singapore Global Relations Office, "Special Global Programmes", undated, [https://www.nus.edu.sg/gro/global-programmes/special-global-programmes/outgoing-students-sino-singapore-undergraduate-exchange-\(ssue\)-programme](https://www.nus.edu.sg/gro/global-programmes/special-global-programmes/outgoing-students-sino-singapore-undergraduate-exchange-(ssue)-programme)

a “natural connection to China”, as expressed by its President, Subra Suresh.¹¹ China’s highly comprehensive academic outreach also encompasses Singapore’s vocational training institutes.

“ In terms of cultural policy, the government has sought a balance between encouraging connection with that Chinese heritage, and promoting a distinctly Singaporean identity based on multiracialism, equality, and meritocracy.”

At the 15th Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) meeting in Chongqing, China, then-Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung and Chinese Vice Minister for Human Resources and Social Security You Jun signed an agreement to facilitate internship exchanges for university/polytechnic students and recent graduates. The Youth Interns Exchange Scheme (YES) 2020 was the first such arrangement that Singapore has ever made with another country (the same was true for China with an Asian country). YES allows an annual quota of up to 500 Singaporean full-time students and recent graduates from Autonomous Universities (AUs) and polytechnics to work with China-based companies for up to half a year, and vice versa, on special internship visas.¹² Singapore’s science parks also showcase home-grown emerging technologies to visiting Chinese delegations, providing insight into cutting-edge domestic research platforms that attract many Western multinational tech firms.

Business associations also forge close links. For example, Business China, a non-profit organization, provides financial aid for Singaporean students pursuing internship opportunities in China, thereby expanding the network of “Singapore-

¹¹ Catherine Armitage, “Nanyang Technological University in Singapore is rising rapidly up the rankings”, Nature Index, *Nature*, 23rd October 2019, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03179-y>

¹² See Singapore-China Youth Interns Exchange Scheme, <https://www.yes.org.sg/>

China-savvy talents”, with strong support from leaders and government officials.¹³ The Chinese private sector also collaborates with Singaporean research institutes. Tech giant Alibaba, for example, set up a joint facility in Singapore with Nanyang Technological University (NTU), to work on artificial intelligence applications in health care, smart homes, and urban transportation. It is the first such research centre outside China.¹⁴

As mentioned above, the vast majority (over 74 percent) of Singaporean population are ethnically Chinese. Older generations of Chinese Singaporeans tend to be more receptive than the young to cultural outreach from the PRC.¹⁵ In terms of cultural policy, the government has sought a balance between encouraging connection with that Chinese heritage, and promoting a distinctly Singaporean identity based on multiracialism, equality, and meritocracy. While the PRC establishes Chinese cultural centres in Singapore, the state’s own Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre – an 11-storey building in the heart of the financial district – is widely seen as a reminder that local Chinese culture is different from China’s.¹⁶

Singapore’s Confucius Institute is interesting in this context. There is one CI in the city-state at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), with language and cultural activities.

A recent field study highlighted that this CI is effective and credible as a centre to study Chinese and learn about Chinese culture. But it proves less effective as a PRC’ soft power tool because its activities have little direct influence, if any, on

The Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre

The Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre has a remit to nurture and promote Singapore Chinese heritage, and to foster mutual understanding among the varied ethnic communities that comprise the city-state’s multicultural makeup. The venue hosts art shows and exhibits, live performances, and seminars showcasing Chinese Singaporean culture.

¹³ Business China, “Launch of ‘Business China-Bank of China Internship Programme’”, 13th May 2019, <https://www.businesschina.org.sg/en/event-highlights-article?slug=launch-of-business-china-bank-of-china-internship-programme>

¹⁴ Saheli Roy Choudhury, “Alibaba just set up its first joint research center outside China to focus on A.I.”, 28th Feb 2018, CNBC website, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/28/alibaba-sets-up-joint-ai-research-lab-in-singapore.html>

¹⁵ Royston Sim, “Report flags how China conducts influence operation in Singapore”, *The Straits Times*, 18th July, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/report-flags-how-china-conducts-influence-operations-in-spore>

¹⁶ Amy Qin, “Worries Grow in Singapore Over China’s Calls to Help ‘Motherland’”, *The New York Times*, 5th August 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/05/world/asia/singapore-china.html>

the students' and participants' perception of China. The researcher argues that the CI at NTU rather promotes the soft power of Singapore's own Chinese culture and multicultural heritage. Among the reasons: Singapore-centred teaching materials, a lack of discussion on current political issues affecting foreign audiences' impression of the PRC, and the dominant role of local stakeholders.¹⁷ The facts that education is very tightly regulated in Singapore and that the population is on average highly educated and well equipped, intellectually and discursively, are certainly further factors.

INFLUENCE IN THE MEDIA

The Chinese Embassy in Singapore uses its Facebook page to post diplomats' opinions on issues affecting the PRC's image and bilateral relations. Newspaper *The Straits Times*, broadly addressing an English-speaking readership, is also used to this purpose. Between 2018 and 2020, Chinese Ambassador Hong Xiaoyong published many articles in *The Straits Times*. The embassy tends to respond robustly to articles perceived as negative or potentially damaging to China's image. In 2018, for example, former senior Singaporean diplomat Bilahari Kausikan claimed in a speech that China was engaged in a campaign of persuasion, inducement, and coercion. The Chinese ambassador replied with a signed article calling the speech a distortion of China's intentions.¹⁸ In a more recent spat, after Kausikan claimed in an op-ed that the Coronavirus outbreak dented the credibility of the CCP, the embassy has again followed up accusing Kausikan of "misinterpret[ing] and smear[ing] China's political and leadership systems".¹⁹

In 2020, US Secretary of Defence Dr. Mark Esper published an article titled "US stands with its partners for a free and open Indo-Pacific", and Ambassador Xiaoyong responded with an article headlined "Cooperation or confrontation? The way ahead for the region". Such calls for closeness between China and

¹⁷ Zhou Xizhuang Michael, "Confucius Institute to the South Seas: A Case of Localization and Soft Power in Singapore", *The China Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1, February 2022, p. 179–219.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Ambassador Hong Xiaoyong publishes a signed article in *The Straits Times* to respond to remarks that distort China's image", 13th July 2018, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/201807/t20180713_623850.html

¹⁹ Kenneth Cheng, "Chinese embassy slams ex-S'pore diplomat Bilahari for 'misinterpreting and smearing' China's political system", 25th February 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/chinese-embassy-slams-ex-spore-diplomat-bilahari-misinterpreting-and-smearing-chinas>

Singapore are also typical of the embassy's website, Facebook page, and official press releases. In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ambassador Xiaoyong's writing for *The Straits Times*²⁰ and *China Daily*²¹ tended to highlight shared commitments to fight the spread and effects of the disease.

Chinese state-media outreach's efficacy in Singapore is difficult to quantify. Reliable, large-scale research on Chinese media influence in general is as of yet limited. The Lowy Institute writes in a report on the subject that "there is in fact very little in the way of clear empirical data on how Chinese state-owned television like CGTN, and CCTV before it, is received by non-Chinese audiences"²², and this is of course also true for Singapore. However, Singapore's Chinese-language daily *Lianhe Zaobao* is an interesting point of departure for Singapore-focussed assessments in this area. The widest-read Mandarin language newspaper in Singapore has leveraged its readership through its online platform, app, and other new media channels, reaching a significantly large audience in Singapore, and indeed Mainland China, to which it also enjoys access. *Lianhe Zaobao's* reporting is not without controversy however, partly owed to the fact that it wishes to keep its access to the Chinese market, even if this argument is rejected by the newspaper's leadership.²³ Singapore-based academic Sense Hofstede has observed that on wide-ranging topics relating to East Asia, from G7 meetings, to the South China Sea or on anything related to Taiwan, the paper is "decidedly more pro-Beijing than you would expect for supposedly non-aligned Singapore".²⁴ The paper may well be sympathetic to a narrative in line with Beijing – such as classing all Taiwan news as domestic –, as also pointed out by Hofstede²⁵, in order to safeguard its access to the much

²⁰ Hong Xiaoyong, "Ambassador Hong Xiaoyong has a signed article "China-Asean ties - A crucial moment in fighting the outbreak hand in hand"", *The Straits Times*, 22nd February, 2020, <http://www.chinaembassy.org.sg/eng/sgsd/t1746127.htm>

²¹ Hong Xiaoyong, "Ambassador Hong Xiaoyong has a signed article 'Maturing relations have promising prospects'", 31st July 2020, <http://www.chinaembassy.org.sg/eng/sgsd/t1802968.htm>

²² Merriden Varrall, "BEHIND THE NEWS: INSIDE CHINA GLOBAL TELEVISION NETWORK - Can China's television network be an effective soft power tool?", 16th Jan 2020, Lowy Institute, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/behind-news-inside-china-global-television-network>

²³ "Chinese embassy responds to report on influence operations in Singapore", 19th July, 2019, *The Straits Times*, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/chinese-embassy-responds-to-report-on-influence-operations-in-singapore>

²⁴ Sense Hofstede, "A look at Singapore's Mandarin media coverage of China", We, the Citizens, 28th August 2021, <https://www.wethecitizens.net/a-look-at-singapores-mandarin-media-coverage-of-china/>

²⁵ See *Ibid.*

larger Chinese market. But its writing has great consequence for Singapore too being the most widely read Mandarin news outlet in the city state. Compared to more neutral or less Beijing-leaning English language news outlets in Singapore, the Mandarin speaking audience of *Lianhe Zaobao* is being presented with a different picture of many of Beijing's actions, facilitating a potential divide in opinion along racial lines - something Singapore is very wary of.

Lastly, *Lianhe Zaobao* is sometimes used by PRC media outlets to lend credibility through foreign press to its narratives, as was seemingly the case when the newspaper interviewed Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai in December 2021 in Shanghai. Chinese state media had previously failed to convince an international audience of Peng's good health and that previously made allegations of sexual misconduct against a Chinese official were all but a misunderstanding. She clarified these points in the interview with the Singapore news outlet, but her comments were not perceived as genuine by many observers. In fact, Bilahari Kausikan stated that "I can understand why ZB (Zaobao) could not resist a scoop but it has just reinforced the impression that it is a PRC stooge".²⁶

Meanwhile, China's training programmes for Southeast Asian journalists include enrolments from Singapore. In 2018, 46 foreign journalists from 44 countries participated in a media exchange scheme organised by the China Public Diplomacy Association (under the 2018 China-Africa Press Centre and China-Asia Pacific Press Centre Media Exchange Programme). The enterprise was designed to promote cooperation between China and South/Southeast Asian and African regions, and to build a foundation for further bilateral exchanges.²⁷ Over a 10-month itinerary, participants were permitted to interview high-ranking Chinese officials from ministries and other

“ The case of *Lianhe Zaobao* however is important to note and shows potential for both legitimate and illegitimate influence, especially on a Mandarin speaking readership.”

²⁶ "China Believed Using Singapore Media for Peng Shuai PR", Asia Sentinel, 22nd December 2021, <https://www.asiasentinel.com/p/china-using-singapore-media-peng-shuai>

²⁷ Ros Chanveasna, "China training journalists from 44 countries", *Khmer Times*, 6th March 2018, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/112027/china-training-journalists-44-countries/>

government departments, exchange views with Chinese academics, visit Chinese media organisations, and report on major political events.²⁸

Overall, Chinese media influence in Singapore is comparatively limited, as internal state-owned media is tightly regulated. The case of *Lianhe Zaobao* however is important to note and shows potential for both legitimate and illegitimate influence, especially on a Mandarin speaking readership. No domestic media agencies are owned by Chinese news organisations. However, *China Daily* content can be found in Singapore's *The Straits Times*²⁹, and as described, *Lianhe Zaobao* runs content that is accessible (read: not critical/supportive) on the Chinese mainland, too. Motivations for this seem first and foremost economic in nature though.

ECONOMIC INFLUENCE

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Singapore and China were actively collaborating on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and related Chongqing Connectivity Initiative (CCI). One major CCI project is the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor (or “western corridor”), designed to link western China with Singapore, ASEAN, and the global market, and to strengthen Singapore’s position as a global maritime trade hub.³⁰ Another is the Southern Transport Corridor (STC), a network of railways forming a shorter, more direct trade route between western China and Southeast Asia.³¹

Singapore defines itself as serving a “pathfinder” role in business relations with China, as affirmed and articulated by both sides in joint statements.³² In 2015,

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *China Daily* and *The Straits Times* are media partners through the Asia News Network (ANN), an alliance of 23 news media titles in Asia.

³⁰ Yu Hong (East Asian Institute), “Connecting Chongqing and Southeast Asia: Challenges and potential of China-Singapore (Chongqing) Connectivity Initiative”, ThinkChina, 10th November 2020, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/connecting-chongqing-and-southeast-asia-challenges-and-potential-china-singapore-chongqing>

³¹ Chong Koh Ping, “Southern Transport Corridor to boost western China-Singapore connectivity”, *The Straits Times*, 31st August 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/southern-transport-corridor-to-boost-western-china-singapore-connectivity>

³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, “Joint Statement between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Singapore on the Establishment of an All-Round Cooperative Partnership Progressing with the Times”, 7th November 2015, <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2015/11/Joint-Statement-between-the-Peoples-Republic-of-China-and-the-Republic-of-Singapore-on-the-Establish>

Singapore and China pledged to encourage and promote bilateral trade and investment through platforms such as the Investment Promotion Committee.³³

Economic relations are also facilitated by business federations and councils, as well as clan associations. As reported in *The Straits Times*, Global Taiwan Institute executive director Russell Hsiao highlighted Chinese clan associations in Singapore as important conduits for outreach via activities such as concerts for communist songs, and visits to revolutionary history sites and ancestral homes in the PRC.³⁴ Meanwhile, Singapore develops broader, deeper connections with Chinese economic centres, and eases the passage of Chinese business interests into Southeast Asia. The Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI) and the Bank of China are leading advocates of Singapore's key role in tapping into Chinese economic power.³⁵



The Chongqing Connectivity Initiative (CCI)

The Chongqing Connectivity Initiative (CCI), launched in 2015, represents the third intergovernmental cooperation project between Singapore and China, following the Suzhou Industrial Park established in China's Jiangsu province in 1994, and the Tianjin Eco-city inaugurated in 2008 in north China.

The first five years of the CCI saw a total of 230 joint initiatives signed for projects covering financial services, aviation and transport, information and communications technologies, and enhanced connectivity in trade and logistics between western China and Southeast Asia.

Source: "Spotlight: China-Singapore Chongqing Connectivity Initiative strengthens link between western China, southeast Asia", Xinhua, 7th November 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-11/07/c_139498672.htm

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ "Chinese embassy responds to report on influence operations in Singapore", 19th July 2019, *The Straits Times*, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/chinese-embassy-responds-to-report-on-influence-operations-in-singapore>

³⁵ Annabeth Leow, "Easier for Singapore firms to enter China in tie-up", 4th July 2017, *The Straits Times*, <https://www.straitstimes.com/business/easier-for-spore-firms-to-enter-china-in-tie-up>

Singaporean companies have also undertaken third-country projects on China's behalf. For example, Sri Lanka's cabinet allowed a Singaporean consulting firm, Surbana Jurong Pvt Ltd (owned by Temasek Holdings Ltd, a company owned in turn by the Government of Singapore), to draw up a plan for a Chinese investment zone in the country's southern port city of Hambantota – just one strand of China's investment in building ports, roads and power stations in Sri Lanka.³⁶ Surbana Jurong, headquartered in Singapore, announced a partnership with the Silk Road Fund – a Chinese state-owned investment body with access to the same pool of capital that funds BRI projects. The two co-signed a Framework Agreement to implement the China-Singapore Co-Investment Platform focusing on infrastructure projects primarily based in Southeast Asia.³⁷

Singapore has also strengthened bilateral links to Chinese financial hubs like Shanghai. On 8th December 2020, at the 16th Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) (co-chaired by Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat and Chinese Executive Vice Premier of State Council Han Zheng), the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) announced new initiatives to enhance financial cooperation between Singapore and China and support COVID-19 recovery activities in both countries.³⁸ As one of them, MAS released 25 billion RMB through its money market operations to better meet the financing and hedging needs in Chinese currency of corporates in Singapore and the region.³⁹

Some of China's biggest technology firms, including Tencent and Alibaba, are expanding operations in Singapore. ByteDance, TikTok's owner, is reported to be investing billions of dollars in the city state, which is building on its renown as an innovation hub in Southeast Asia. These Chinese firms are effectively following a trend set by Western counterparts, who have long used Singapore as a regional base in Southeast Asia. At a time of increased tension between Washington and Beijing, Singapore is broadly considered "neutral" territory with

³⁶ Shihar Aneez, "Singapore firm to draw up Chinese investment zone plan in Sri Lanka", 6th June 2018, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/sri-lanka-china-investmentzone-idUSL3N1T83RN>

³⁷ Surbana, "Singapore's Surbana Jurong and China's Silk Road Fund form co-investment platform for infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia", 29th April 2019, Surbanajurong.com, <https://surbanajurong.com/resources/news-press-releases/singapores-surbana-jurong-and-chinas-silk-road-fund-form-co-investment-platform-for-infrastructure-projects-in-southeast-asia/>

³⁸ Monetary Authority of Singapore, "Singapore and China expand financial cooperation to support post-COVID-19 recovery", 8th December 2020, <https://www.mas.gov.sg/news/media-releases/2020/singapore-and-china-expand-financial-cooperation-to-support-post-COVID-19-recovery>

³⁹ *Ibid.*

good relations on both sides. It is also attractive to Chinese tech companies wishing to separate their domestic and overseas operations. Some observers point out that operating through regional headquarters in Singapore may help avoid the “appearance” of Chinese investment.⁴⁰ Singapore welcomes Chinese businesses who use the city as a base for internationalisation.⁴¹

Chinese tech firms also appear to be leading the way into Singapore’s consumer market. According to some commercial sources, one out of every

“ Economic relations are also facilitated by business federations and councils, as well as clan associations.”

five smartphones purchased in Singapore is a Chinese brand (Oppo, Huawei, Xiao Ming, Xiao Mi, Da Xiong and others).⁴² Not only do Singaporean consumers show a preference for Chinese high tech products and cutting-edge providers, some of their institutions are actively promoting them. This seems significant,

given that Singapore is home to the largest Chinese diasporic population in Southeast Asia. The city-state contributes to the internationalisation of these brands, and thereby helps extend Chinese soft power in the commercial field by its choice of products.

Perhaps the latest Chinese brand to attract Singaporeans are the Chinese COVID-19 vaccines. Although the vast majority of Singapore’s highly vaccinated population has received vaccines produced by Moderna and Biontech/Pfizer, Chinese-made vaccines have found their way into Singapore. This is remarkable as the former vaccines are free and were recommended early on by the government, but in order to receive the latter, an administrative fee

⁴⁰ Justin Harper, “Singapore becomes hub for Chinese tech amid US tensions”, 16th September 2020, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-54172703>

⁴¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, “Joint Statement between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Singapore on the Establishment of an All-Round Cooperative Partnership Progressing with the Times”, 7th November, 2015, <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2015/11/Joint-Statement-between-the-Peoples-Republic-of-China-and-the-Republic-of-Singapore-on-the-Establish>

⁴² Annette Anthony, “8 Best China-Brand Phones in S’pore That Have Made Apple / Samsung Kanchiong”, undated, Goodyfeed website [downloaded on 7th July 2021], <https://goodyfeed.com/8-best-china-brand-phones-in-s-pore-that-have-made-apple-samsung-kanchiong/>

(10–25 Singapore dollars or 7,42–18,57 US dollars) and exclusion from national compensation scheme if the vaccine takers suffer serious side effects or death, had to be taken into account. In terms of numbers overall, the amount of Chinese-made vaccines used in Singapore remains small though (see Figure 4) and individual motivations to choose Sinovac or Sinopharm had presumably less to do with the attraction of or even loyalty to a Chinese brand, and more with concerns over the mRNA vaccines that spread in some quarters early in 2021, or practical considerations of presumed less complicated travel to China.⁴³

Chinese migrant workers and tourists must be considered another form of economic input. Chinese immigrants are the second largest foreign-born group in Singapore's population, after the foreign-born population originating from Malaysia, numbering around 400,000 in 2019.⁴⁴ Chinese tourists form another important source of human capital. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Singapore benefited from strong numbers in outbound business travel from the PRC, and related spending.⁴⁵

⁴³ Dewey Sim, "Covid-19: Singapore residents who took Sinovac turn to Pfizer to up their antibody counts, amid debate on booster shots", *South China Morning Post*, 31st August 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3146944/covid-19-singapore-residents-who-took-sinovac-turn>

⁴⁴ "International migrant stock 2019: Country Profiles: Singapore", Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, 2019, <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/countryprofiles.asp>

⁴⁵ "Chinese tourists handed 30-page list of dos and don'ts in Singapore", 24th September 2017, *South China Morning Post*, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3138309/singaporeans-chinese-nationals-queue-sinovac-vaccine>

THAILAND

KAS Office Thailand¹



The “Milk Tea Alliance” is an online movement defined by anti-China or anti-authoritarianism sentiments. It emerged in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Thailand in 2020 and takes its name from the custom of adding milk to tea, a practice popular outside mainland China in Asia.

Source: © ChaniTh, Shutterstock

GOVERNANCE AND DIPLOMATIC INFLUENCE

In the 1970's and 1980's Thailand and China established diplomatic relations (1975) and became strategic and military partners in curbing Vietnamese and Soviet expansion. Their relationship, that then evolved towards trade and economic cooperation, has since been underpinned by mutual non-interference in domestic developments.² China treated the two recent coups in Thailand in 2006 and 2014 – the latest installing a military regime that lasted almost five years – as a Thai internal issue and maintained a close rapport with the Thai government, giving the PRC an edge over competing foreign interests. The PRC's growing economic power, its fostering of interpersonal ties with Thai elites, and its employment of skilled diplomats, have all helped Beijing disseminate its regional and international positions, and discreetly promote its political values among the Thai public.

After the military coup in 2014, as Thailand's relationships with other global powers – and particularly the US – were deteriorating, the Chinese ambassador immediately assured the junta that Beijing would remain a receptive ally. Within days, the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army and leader of the coup, General Prayut Chan-o-cha, met with Chinese business representatives and affirmed his commitment to pursue a strategic partnership with China 'at all levels'.³ Thailand's foreign policy has arguably been gravitating toward China since the Thaksin administration (2001–2006),⁴ but this shift became more pronounced after the 2014 coup. By December of that year, the two states signed an MoU to cooperate on high-speed rail construction, which had been discussed by several previous governments but was now approved by the military-backed National Legislative Assembly.⁵ Arms purchases from China

¹ This case study was prepared by the KAS Office Thailand, based on the data and the input of an in-country researcher who wishes to remain anonymous. (See methodology in the introduction.)

² Yong Deng, "Sino-Thai Relations: From Strategic Co-operation to Economic Diplomacy", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (March 1992), ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, pp. 360–374, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25798124>

³ Benjamin Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the US and a Rising China*, Zed Book, London, 2017, p. 294.

⁴ *Ibid.* See also: Joshua Kurlantzick, "Thailand: Shifting Ground Between the U.S. and a Rising China: A Review", 27th February 2018, Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/thailand-shifting-ground-between-us-and-rising-china-review>

⁵ David M. Lampton, Selina Ho and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia*, University of California Press, California, 2020, p. 96–104.

increased dramatically, while US military aid was cut. A joint air force exercise was conducted in 2015, and a long delay in acquiring new submarines ended with an agreement to procure three Chinese vessels in 2017.

As Chinese diplomats and officials defend abroad the PRC's "One China" principle and promote Beijing's positions on domestic and international matters, Thailand has been broadly, if selectively, supportive. In July 2015, the Thai government deported almost 100 Uighur migrants back to China – a violation of international law according to Human Rights Watch.⁶ In October 2016, Hong Kong pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong was not allowed to participate in an event organised by the Faculty of Political Science at Chulalongkorn University, to which he had been invited. He was detained at Suvarnabhumi Airport and sent back to Hong Kong by Thai authorities after 12 hours.⁷

Thailand is not a claimant state on the South China Sea issue. Its official position remains a neutral commitment to ASEAN's multilateral approach in dealing with the dispute. To ensure Beijing's trust in that neutrality, Bangkok has played a good offices role, coordinating and advancing China-ASEAN talks on the Code of Conduct of the South China Sea.⁸

Communities along the Mekong river and NGOs have aired grievances over severe droughts and a significant drop in water levels, blaming Chinese dams upstream. Even given evidence to support those claims, successive Thai governments haven't raised publicly this issue with China in bilateral or multilateral engagements through the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation or Mekong River Commission, often arguing that the droughts are rather related to climate change.

To handle the COVID-19 pandemic, Thailand has been receptive to, and reliant upon, Chinese vaccine diplomacy. The government has favoured China-made vaccines, especially Sinovac, which was delivered in largest volume in the first half

⁶ Amy Sawita Lefevre and Pracha Hariraksapitak, "Thailand sends nearly 100 Uighur migrants back to China", *Reuters*, 9th July 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-uighurs-china-idUSKCN0PJ0E120150709>

⁷ Tom Philips and Bonnie Malkin, "Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong detained in Thailand at China's request – reports", *The Guardian*, 5th October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/05/hong-kong-activist-joshua-wong-detained-thailand-china-deportation>

⁸ Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit, "Coordinating the South China Sea Issue: Thailand's roles in the code of conduct development", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 5, Issue 3, September 2015, p. 403–431, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcv006>

of 2021 (a fact partly accounted for by delays in local production of AstraZeneca's vaccine). Sinovac remained the principal vaccine available to the general public through summer 2021, despite vocal doubts and complaints in the country as regards its efficacy. In September 2021, despite more brands being available on the market, the Thai government still chose to order more Sinovac vaccines and Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai warned opposition parties that "criticism over the Sinovac vaccine not only twists facts, but also hurts the friendly relationship between Thailand and China".⁹

“ To handle the COVID-19 pandemic, Thailand has been receptive to, and reliant upon, Chinese vaccine diplomacy.”

China has the largest diplomatic network of any country operating in Thailand, extending far beyond its embassy in Bangkok to three regional consulates in the north, northeast, and south. The US, by contrast, has only one such consulate, in Chiangmai. Chinese diplomats, and particularly ambassadors, are known to be highly-trained and capable Thai-speaking professionals.¹⁰ They tend to prioritise engagements with Thai political and business elites, and especially the royal family.¹¹ After the establishment of diplomatic relations between Thailand and the People's Republic of China in 1975, the government of Thanin Kraiwichian (1976–77) and parts of the political elites were known to mistrust Communist China. The PRC's first ambassador to Thailand, Chai Zemin, tried to improve the situation by meeting with HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej's mother, HRH Princess Srinagarindra. He later organised a Chinese acrobatic show for

⁹ "Thai senior official warns against baseless criticism of Sinovac vaccine", Xinhua Net, 7th September 2021, http://www.news.cn/english/2021-09/07/c_1310174042.htm

¹⁰ Benjamin Zawacki, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

¹¹ See for example, "Seize Opportunity to Promote China-Thailand Relationship – Ambassador Lyu Jian's joint written interview with Thai-Sino Association of Press", 16th November 2017, Embassy of the PRC in the Kingdom of Thailand, <http://www.chinaembassy.or.th/eng/dszl/dshd/t1511543.htm>

her in the palace, with select members of the country's political and business elites also in attendance.¹² Rapport with the Thai royal family has since become a matter of diplomatic custom and tradition. HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn and her sister HRH Princess Chulabhorn are frequent guests of China, with the former making more than 40 state visits since her first in 1981. She has published 13 travel memoirs based on those trips (conveying positive impressions of developments and policies within the PRC), and more than a dozen translated works of Chinese literature. She has received several awards from the Chinese government, including a Friendship Medal presented by President Xi Jinping on the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China.



The Friendship Medal

The Friendship Medal is one of the PRC's two highest order of honour. It is awarded to foreigners who have made outstanding contributions to cooperation between China and foreign countries.

Royal visits to China are covered in the daily royal news broadcasted by all free Thai TV channels, and Chinese official statements on Thailand make frequent, positive reference to the monarchy.¹³

Beijing has also worked to build and maintain connections with Thai political parties and leaders. Members of the ruling Palang Pracharat Party joined the "Communist Party of China and World Political Parties Summit" on 6th July 2021, marking the 100th

anniversary of the CCP. China has also maintained a close relationship with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–2006), who resided in the PRC after being deposed by a military coup, and still has a house there. In the past, ancestral visits to China by he and his sister, former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra (2011–2014), were welcomed and facilitated by Chinese politicians and businessmen.¹⁴ According to scholars, reluctance to becoming embroiled in Thailand's domestic politics ahead of the 2019 elections and a desire to remain neutral and work with all sides might have prompted China to show some

¹² Sitthiphon Kruarattikarn, *Thailand and The People's Republic of China: Volatile Politics and Troubles in the Early Years of Diplomatic Relations (1975–1978)*, International Studies Center, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, Bangkok, 2000, p. 38–45.

¹³ See for example, "Seize Opportunity to Promote China-Thailand Relationship – Ambassador Lyu Jian's joint written interview with Thai-Sino Association of Press", *art. cit.*

¹⁴ "Ancestral village cools to Shinawatras", *Bangkok Post*, 19th January 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/1614142/ancestral-village-cools-to-shinawatras>

distance towards the Shinawatras when the PRC's state media coverage of their ancestral visit in Guangdong province in January 2019 was deleted within a day.¹⁵

While China does not advocate for a communist ideology in Thailand, its positions on democracy and human rights, its authoritarian model to eradicate poverty and, more recently, Xi Jinping's published works, all naturally appeal to Thai pro-military factions. Following the 2014 coup, the CCP's newspaper, *People's Daily*, claimed that Western powers had been fomenting political turmoil to advance their own nominally pro-democratic agenda in Thailand and other countries.¹⁶ In a politically very polarized Thai society, this argument was broadly supported by many pro-coup/government forces, and deployed as counter-criticism of the US

“ While China does not advocate for a communist ideology in Thailand, its positions on democracy and human rights, its authoritarian model to eradicate poverty and, more recently, Xi Jinping's published works, all naturally appeal to Thai pro-military factions.”

and its allies when condemned on matters such as military coups and civic rights violations. In 2016, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha himself recommended that the cabinet read *The Governance of China*, a collection of Xi Jinping's speeches and writings, arguing that it was relevant to the situation in Thailand.¹⁷ On the

¹⁵ Kinling Lo and He Huifeng, "Beijing treads carefully when scions of Thai political dynasty arrive in China in search of their roots", *South China Morning Post*, 7th January 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2181064/beijing-treads-carefully-when-scions-thai-political-dynasty>

¹⁶ Benjamin Zawacki, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

¹⁷ "Big Tu (Prayut Chan-o-cha) suggests the cabinet read *The Governance of China*, says it suits Thailand", *Matichon*, 12th April 2016 (in Thai), https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_103564

other hand, the youth-led anti-government movement gains inspiration from, and shares causes with, pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Flags with Taiwan's map and "Milk Tea Alliance"¹⁸ placards were seen during large anti-government demonstrations in late 2020.



The Milk Tea Alliance

The Milk Tea Alliance takes its name from the custom of adding milk to tea, popular in Taiwan and outside mainland China. Initially emerging in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Thailand, this largely online movement is defined by anti-China or anti-authoritarianism sentiments that have since spread under this banner to Myanmar, India, and other countries. More than 11 million tweets bore the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag in 2020, according to the operators of that platform.

EDUCATION AND CULTURAL INFLUENCE

Beijing has been promoting Chinese cultural studies, Mandarin language-learning, and people-to-people exchanges across several channels. The growing economic and political power of the PRC is in itself a spur for Thais to look toward China and learn Mandarin. To that end, Thailand had 16 Confucius Institutes (CI) and at least 20 Confucius Classrooms (CC) in schools across the country in 2021. The CIs supply volunteer teachers and teaching materials for Chinese language programmes at their host universities. Most Chinese cultural events on those campuses are also CI-funded. At the same time, the Thai government has made efforts to promote Mandarin learning in state schools. Many now offer Chinese language classes to students from primary years and up.

Given the volume of tourists from China before the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as business travellers and labourers, it is increasingly common to see Chinese-language signs at cultural landmarks, in transport, or in bank offices. In 2016 a report commissioned by the Thai Ministry of Education outlined the

¹⁸ The "Milk Tea Alliance" is originally an alliance of netizens from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand against the PRC's "One China" principle and authoritarianism. See Information Box on the topic.

government's intention for 20 percent of upper secondary school students (around 100,000 persons per year), 20 percent of vocational school graduates (around 35,000 persons per year), and 20 percent of university graduates (around 83,000 persons per year) to receive quality education in Chinese, and to become proficient in Mandarin.¹⁹

Academic exchanges have also helped establish and expand people-to-people ties. According to official PRC data, 28,608 Thais studied in China in 2018 – representing the second largest foreign cohort after South Koreans (50,600).²⁰ Schemes operated by China Scholarship Council sponsor around 12 percent of incoming foreign students a year and 7 percent to Chinese studying abroad.²¹ Chinese students also represent the largest proportion of foreign nationals enrolled in Thai institutions of higher education. According to statistics from the Thai Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, the figure for 2018 was 11,993, or 47.8 percent of all overseas students in undergraduate, graduate, training, and exchange programmes.²² The Chinese Government Scholarship supports PRC-born students pursuing a degree (Masters and PhD) in Engineering, Technology and Management at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in Thailand.²³

Numerous agreements have been co-signed by Thai and Chinese universities to facilitate various forms of collaboration. Campuses hosting CIs benefit from short-term summer programmes, year-long exchanges, and MA scholarships for degrees in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Colleges without CIs can establish exchange schemes and respective programmes independently. For example, the Pridi Banomyong International College of Thammasat University offers a BA in Chinese Studies, which includes an exchange with its leading

¹⁹ Office of the Education Council, *Research Report for the Development of Chinese Language Educational System in Thailand*, Thai Ministry of Education, 2016, <http://backoffice.onec.go.th/uploads/Book/1517-file.pdf>

²⁰ Statistical report on international students in China for 2018, Ministry of Education, The People's Republic of China, 18th April 2019, http://en.moe.gov.cn/en_xlm/Spotlight/201904/t20190418_378691.html

²¹ Ryan Fedasiuk, "The China Scholarship Council: An Overview", Center for Security and Emerging Technology, Georgetown University, July 2020, <https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/the-china-scholarship-council-an-overview/>

²² Thai Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation, "Higher Education Information Dissemination System", http://www.info.mua.go.th/info/table_stat_02.php?page=2&data_show

²³ Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), "Chinese Government Scholarships", <https://www.ait.ac.th/admissions/scholarships/china-scholarship-council-scholarships/>

partner university in China, Peking University, for at least one semester.²⁴ In 2019, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) supported the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT) with six fellowships for short-term research trips in mainland China for Thai academics in social sciences. Such cooperation proceeds from an MoU signed by CASS and NRCT in 2000.²⁵ Joint degree programs between Thai and Chinese universities include the M.Eng/PhD in mechanical engineering at Prince of Songkhla and Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and a shared PhD program between Chiang Mai University and Chengdu University, focusing on research into cross-border e-commerce. Khon Kaen University also has a dual-degree BA programme.

It is difficult to estimate the effect of these academic exchanges on public opinion. Each year, many and varied Thai scholars, but also civil servants and journalists are invited by the Chinese Communist Party for study trips to China. In general, the participants report that they were warmly welcomed for itineraries that include sightseeing and meetings with high level officials. Some have been

repeatedly invited to seminars. Beijing's approach may well encourage Thai academics to think and speak well of China.

“ Each year, many and varied Thai scholars, but also civil servants and journalists are invited by the Chinese Communist Party for study trips to China.”

In recent years, the PRC embassy and Confucius Institutes have become more vocal in directly espousing the political values and positions of the Chinese state within Thai society. This may be at least partly a defensive reaction to political unrest in various parts of China – most

notably the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong – and accusations of Chinese culpability for the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, the Confucius Institute at Chulalongkorn University celebrated HRH Princess Sirindhorn's reception of

²⁴ Pridi Banomyong International College, “Chinese Studies Program”, <http://www.pbic.tu.ac.th/chinese-studies-program/>

²⁵ National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT), “Thai-Chinese Academic Cooperation project on social sciences between the National Research Council (NRCT) and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS)”, <https://www.nrct.go.th/scholar/mou/china/cass>

the Friendship Medal from President Xi Jinping, and used that occasion to underline the CCP's close relations with the Thai monarchy, and the success of Deng Xiaoping's reform policies.

INFLUENCE IN THE MEDIA

China is an increasingly active player on (social) media platforms in Thailand. Bloggers, YouTubers, Facebook users, and self-styled "influencers" propagate pro-PRC content. The most influential Chinese YouTuber in Thailand (and elsewhere) is Li Ziqi, who had over 16 million followers worldwide in summer 2021.²⁶ Her videos present an idealised vision of life in the Chinese rural countryside, with the host herself harvesting and cooking her own food as part of a bucolic rural lifestyle, shared with her elderly grandmother and various charming farm animals. Li Ziqi is popular for example among learners and speakers of the Chinese language in Thailand. She contributes to promote a positive image of traditional Chinese culture. However, as her content largely falls within the category of light, escapist, feel-good entertainment, it's difficult to claim that Li Ziqi has any obvious or overt sway over her fans' political perspective on the PRC.²⁷

Facebook page "Thai-Chinese Talk" is much more openly political. Mainly presented in Thai, this page with over 150,000 followers claims it was authorised by the China Global Television Network (CGTN) to stream all nine episodes of the first season of "Chinese Wisdom in Classics: Classic Quotes by Xi Jinping", which was produced by CGTN. Its stated mission is to connect the two countries, and encourage a better understanding of Chinese culture, people, and society among the Thai population.²⁸ Many Thai-Chinese business associations also regularly post pro-China content to their official websites and Facebook pages.

Traditional print and broadcast media will sometimes provide positive coverage of China's domestic successes and international dealings. Thai public TV channels occasionally air China-related documentaries produced inside the PRC, or

²⁶ Li Ziqi, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoC47do520os_4DBMEFGg4A

²⁷ At time of writing, Li Ziqi had been offline since summer 2021, as her business was subject to legal disputes with partners and brand managers. See for example: Viola Zhou, "What Happened to Li Ziqi, China's Most Famous YouTuber?", *Vice*, 20th September 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qj8qqv/li-ziqi-youtube-star-business-china>

²⁸ See: <https://www.facebook.com/thaichinesetalk>

sponsored by the Chinese embassy. In July 2021, for instance, Channel 5 screened a series of talks and documentaries titled “Path Towards Poverty Eradication”, outlining China’s policies, strategies, and successes in that endeavour.²⁹ Or, to take an example from print media, executives of *The Bangkok Post* announced in September 2021 that they are “willing to support the strengthening of the Thai-Sino relations”, after an online meeting with the Chinese ambassador.³⁰ Like their peers from other countries, Chinese ambassadors to Thailand at times publish opinion pieces in domestic newspapers, promoting bilateral relations and defending their government’s positions, especially on international issues like rising tensions with the US and the South China Sea. The Chinese embassy in Bangkok maintains an active Facebook presence, with over 70,000

followers in the fall of 2021 on a page mostly dedicated to the same purpose: promoting and defending China.³¹

“**The most influential Chinese YouTuber in Thailand (and elsewhere) is Li Ziqi, who had over 16 million followers worldwide in summer 2021.**”

Despite these attempts to gain influence in the digital sphere, China can hardly be said to dominate Thai cyberspace, which is largely the domain of the young. The popularity of Li Ziqi’s content,

for example, does not translate to any particular deference toward the PRC, and overtly pro-Beijing posts on “Thai-Chinese Talk” and the embassy’s Facebook page are regularly, openly mocked. A failure of the Chinese government to influence cyberspace in Thailand is reflected in the case of the so-called “#nnevy controversy” that gave rise to the “Milk Tea Alliance”, when the Chinese Embassy used its Facebook page to rebuke what it considered disrespect of the “One China” principle by two young Thai celebrities.³² Social media platforms have

²⁹ See “Path Towards Poverty Eradication EP1–4”, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjfGvlxbTW0&t=316s>

³⁰ See “Boosting Thai-Sino ties”, *Bangkok Post*, 28th September 2021, p. 2. The Bangkok Post is Thailand’s oldest English-language daily newspaper. Its articles on foreign policy come primarily from Western news agencies.

³¹ Chinese Embassy Bangkok, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064440681953>

³² Patpicha Tanakasempipat, “Young Thais join ‘Milk Tea Alliance’ in online backlash that angers Beijing”. 15th April 2020, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-china-internet-idUSKCN21X1ZT>. Nnevy is the social media name of one of the two Thai celebrities involved in this case.

been forums for solidarity between the youth-led pro-democracy movement in Thailand and its equivalents in Hong Kong and Taiwan, branding the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance that emerged in April 2020 as a reference for anti-authoritarianism sentiments.

ECONOMIC INFLUENCE

Like other countries in the region, Thailand's economic dependence on China has increased roughly in line with the growth of the PRC's trading and investing clout. The two countries entered into free trade under the ASEAN framework in 2002, with the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), and intensified trade relations early on, especially with the Early Harvest Program lowering tariffs for agricultural products that started in January 2004. Several further agreements upgraded and expanded the ACFTA. Subsequent growth saw China overtake Japan to become Thailand's largest trading partner in 2013, with a constant negative balance of trade for Thailand.³³ By 2019, the PRC constituted 16.4 percent of the country's overall two-way trade.³⁴ Machinery has been the dominant Chinese-made import for a decade, a high-value category that is essential to Thailand's domestic production. China is the biggest importer of Thai fruits and rubber. Japan remains the largest source of Foreign Direct Investment, but China is closing fast here too, belonging to the Top 3 in terms of FDI in Thailand in 2017–2020.³⁵

Tourist revenues are vital to the Thai economy, accounting for 17 percent of GDP in the first half of 2019.³⁶ The “Land of Smiles” is an extremely popular destination for Chinese tourists in particular, and visitor numbers from the PRC leapt from over 4.6 million in 2014 to over 11 million in 2019 (representing 27.5 percent of all foreign travellers)³⁷. Both governments acknowledge a reliance

³³ “Thailand's Major Trading Partners”, Information and Communication Technology Center, Office of the Permanent Secretary, Thai Ministry of Commerce, in cooperation with customs department, <http://tradereport.moc.go.th/Report/Default.aspx?Report=TradeThCountryTrade>

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Thailand Board of Investment, “Foreign Investment Reports and Statistics”, https://www.boi.go.th/index.php?page=statistics_oversea_report_st&language=th

³⁶ Nichapat Surawatthananon, “Tourism and its roles in driving Thai economy forward: Real or fraud hero?”, Bank of Thailand, 29th October 2019, https://www.bot.or.th/Thai/ResearchAndPublications/articles/Pages/Article_29Oct2019.aspx

³⁷ National Statistical Office (Thailand), “International Tourist Arrival to Thailand by Nationality: 2010–2019”, <http://statbbi.nso.go.th/staticreport/page/sector/th/17.aspx>

on tourist trade. When a boat accident off Phuket killed 47 Chinese tourists in July 2018, Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan openly blamed Chinese tour operators. Pro-PRC voices responded with indignant editorials in the state-run *China Daily*, and with invective on the comments boards of social media platforms. The number of Chinese arrivals dropped sharply, prompting Prawit Wongsuwan to publicly apologise and offer a banquet with 5,000 mangoes and 1.5 tonnes sticky rice for Chinese tourists.³⁸

Bangkok is essential to BRI projects that will fuse transport routes between China and Southeast Asia. The Thai capital is to serve as a hub on the Kunming-Singapore Central Line of China's high-speed rail network. These projects are in line with the connectivity ambitions of ASEAN and supported by the Thai government as several related rail and road links will converge in Bangkok, running north-south and east-west through the region. These projects will also help Thailand substantially upgrade its ageing railways, to a degree far beyond the country's present technological capacity. Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva (2008–2011) was interested in the idea of using Chinese technology to create rail links between Thailand, China, Laos, Malaysia and Singapore. Negotiations began 2008, proceeding slowly until construction finally started in December 2019, with a first phase that covered 3.5 kilometres. Thailand's goal is to fully fund the project itself to reduce its overreliance on Chinese investments and loans. Thailand also negotiated with Beijing to retain managing rights, though there has been little progress since that first phase was completed in September 2020.³⁹

Since the launch of the BRI, overseas Chinese associations and businesses in Thailand have been emboldened in actively strengthening Sino-Thai ties, with the active assistance of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO), a government department in Beijing in charge of cultivating support among overseas Chinese communities.⁴⁰ Think tanks and research institutes at Thai universities tend not to be directly supported by the Chinese state, but receive funding through donations from major Thai corporate concerns with close links to China. For example: the Charoen Pokphand (CP) Group, Thailand largest private company, has supported the teaching of Chinese Studies at Thammasat University's East

³⁸ "Sticky rice and mangoes to lure Chinese", *Bangkok Post*, 19th January 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/travel/1614110/sticky-rice-and-mangoes-to-lure-chinese>

³⁹ David Lampton et al., *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia*, *op. cit.*, p. 136–137.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 126.

Asian Research Institute and at Panyapiwat Institute of Management.⁴¹ Sino-Thai business associations also fund and/or organise seminars promoting bilateral relations. One such seminar, marking the 100th anniversary of the CCP, brought together high-profile politicians of various parties including former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and Chinese Chargé d’Affaires Yang Xin.⁴² The Thai-Chinese Culture and Economy Association (TCCEA) is prominent among these associations. It was established after leaders of the People’s Liberation Army recognised a need for a non-governmental organisation to liaise between Thai and Chinese armed forces and focused originally on military and security cooperation before broadening its spectrum to economic and cultural topics. TCCEA membership now includes military commanders, government officials, politicians, and business leaders.⁴³

⁴¹ Panyapiwat Institute of Management is a private institute managed and operated by the CP Group itself. See also “Thammasat University joins hands with CP Group to Produce skilled workers that meet the needs of the 21st century world”, *Matichon*, 19th July 2019 (in Thai), https://www.matichon.co.th/news-monitor/news_1589087

⁴² “100th anniversary of the Communist Party of China and 46 years of close relationship between Thailand and China”, *Manager Online*, 27th June 2021, <https://mgronline.com/onlinesection/detail/9640000062211>. Among the organizers: 1) Thai-Chinese Strategic Research Centre (TCRC); 2) The Belt and Road Cooperation Research Centre (CTC); 3) Thai-Chinese One Belt One Road Trade Association; 4) ASEAN-China Economy and Trade Promotion Association; 5) Thai-Chinese Friendship Association; 6) Extension School of University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce; 6) Bangkok Today News Agency; and 7) The Leader Asia News Agency by Thansettakij Multimedia News Agency.

⁴³ Thai-Chinese Culture and Economy Association (TCCEA), “About the Association”, <https://www.thaizhong.org/th/about-us/history.html>

VIETNAM

Dr. Pham Sy Thanh



Vietnamese students wait for the arrival of China's President Xi Jinping before the inauguration ceremony of the Chinese sponsored Vietnam-China Friendship Palace in Hanoi, Vietnam, on 12 November 2017.

Source: © Nguyen Huy Kham, Reuters

GOVERNANCE AND DIPLOMATIC INFLUENCE

Vietnam's attitude toward China might best be described as ambivalent. The two countries share similar political and economic systems, a long land border, and certain cultural concepts (e.g. Confucianism). Over more than 70 years of diplomatic relations, both countries have cooperated on multiple levels, maintaining ties between their respective communist parties, governments, parliaments and socio-political organisations, as well as individual cities and provinces. The ruling Vietnamese Communist Party is pragmatic in dealing with China through strategic partnership, various collaborative geostrategic projects, and close economic links. Between 2014 and 2019, China conducted two state visits, one official visit, and 20 working visits to Vietnam. Through such exchanges, China can share its goals and priorities on regional and international affairs or present its development model. This is also a strategy China uses to influence the views of the ruling authorities.

China also coordinates with Vietnam on capacity-building courses for senior civil servants and party officials as well as members of the armed forces. Chinese government figures and military commanders conduct elite-to-elite diplomacy on multiple official visits to Vietnam every year.

“ Chinese government figures and military commanders conduct elite-to-elite diplomacy on multiple official visits to Vietnam every year.”

Since 2018, the Chinese Embassy in Vietnam has regularly held press conferences to announce or clarify Beijing policy positions – on Sino-US trade frictions, for example, in June 2019, or on the COVID-19 pandemic in May 2020. Regular embassy statements and press releases also tend to highlight cooperation in the Mekong region and the impact of the China-US relationship on regional security.

China and Vietnam are active participants in regional and multilateral cooperation mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ADMM-Plus¹, and

¹ “The ADMM-Plus is a platform for ASEAN and its eight Dialogue Partners Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States (collectively referred to as the “Plus Countries”), to strengthen security and defence cooperation for peace, stability, and



South China Sea

Multiple ASEAN members have formally registered territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea: Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam. China's territorial claim covers about 90 percent of the 3.5 million-square-kilometre sea.

the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC). This does not guarantee equanimity however, and the PRC's advancing of its own agenda through such forums has often exacerbated tensions between the two "brother states". Disputed territorial claims in the South China Sea make a critical case in point. In 2014, the transfer of a Chinese oil platform into waters claimed by Vietnam sparked anti-Beijing protests in a tightly-governed state not known for public demonstrations. More recently, in 2018, protestors rallied violently against the establishment of special economic zones that were seen as exclusively beneficial to

Chinese stakeholders. Chinese leaders have made frequent public statements on the core importance of the area to their interests. The PRC has repeatedly sent research vessels into contested waters. A Vietnamese fishing boat was sunk by the Chinese coast guard in April 2020. China's own claims are underpinned by an aggressive expansion policy aiming at creating facts on the ground with the "incorporation" of reefs and small islands, the building of ports and runways, the stationing of missiles and reconnaissance facilities. Such expansionary tactics can easily be interpreted as provocations, as China emphasises its military and paramilitary presence, displaces fishing boats, and hinders economic activities in areas claimed by Vietnam. This also presents Hanoi with a dilemma: to defend territorial integrity surely means damaging Sino-Vietnamese relations and putting regional stability at hazard.

Vietnam's rush to modernise its naval forces is a measure of China's ongoing struggle to advance that "core interest" in the South China Sea, and sway its neighbour to its purposes. Vietnamese leaders have been consistent on the issue of sovereignty, and strongly favour a rules-based global and regional order – a logical position for a nation with such geostrategic significance, in such close proximity to a more economically and militarily powerful actor. Relations with the US, and other multilateral mechanisms, are carefully navigated to counterbalance dealings with China.

development in the region. The Inaugural ADMM-Plus was convened in Ha Noi, Viet Nam, on 12 October 2010." See: ASEAN, "About the ASEAN Defence Ministers", 6th February 2017, <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/about-admm/about-admm-plus.html>

EDUCATION AND CULTURAL INFLUENCE

China has long exerted cultural and educational influence over Vietnam, mostly by way of nominally friendly offers of shared activities and scholarship programmes. When President Xi Jinping visited Hanoi in late 2017, he unveiled the Vietnam-China Friendship Palace, valued at 36 million US dollars and financed by China. But, unlike comparable cultural centres like Germany's Goethe Institute, France's L'Espece, or the Japan Foundation, the Vietnam-China Friendship Palace rarely hosts any major events designed to attract wider public attention.

There is one Confucius Institute (CI) in Vietnam, established in December 2014 at the Hanoi University campus. Onsite activities include Chinese language classes, interpreting competitions, and singing contests. Language lessons are relevant because tens of thousands of Chinese residents create jobs in Vietnam that require knowledge of Mandarin. Overall, however, the CI does not organise a wide spectrum of activities and has only modest reach into the broader public consciousness.

Chinese movies may have a greater cultural impact, ranking third in the film market and accounting for nine percent of cinema screenings in Vietnam², while Chinese television series represent almost 40 percent of foreign production broadcast on national TV channels.³ Moreover, Chinese romantic novels have gained a huge and growing readership in recent years, across a market that extends from junior high school and university students to office workers. Such Chinese cultural products have been folded into the fabric of Vietnamese society, but it does not necessarily follow that they are shaping public opinion to any discernible effect.

China is a significant actor in education, mainly by providing scholarships. For example, statistics presented by the Chinese Ministry of Education show that

“China is a significant actor in education, mainly by providing scholarships.”

² Hồng Vân, “Cultural industry: Vietnam’s film market Impressive numbers”, Toquoc, 1st August 2019 (in Vietnamese), <http://toquoc.vn/cong-nghiep-van-hoa-thi-truong-dien-anh-viet-nam-nhung-con-so-an-tuong-20190731151209656.htm>

³ Vietnam Television report provided to the team for implementing the Vietnam - China Cultural Exchange Annual Report (2018–2019) conducted by Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts and China National Cultural Research Center, China Academy of Social Sciences.

more than 10,000 Vietnamese citizens studied in China every year between 2014 and 2018 (see Figure 6). Among them, 2,000 received a scholarship from the PRC, according to Vietnam's ambassador to China in 2017.⁴ Official sources also show a slow year-on-year increase in Vietnamese students choosing to study in the PRC (see Figure 6). Yet, there is no evidence that alumni networks of China-trained students may substantially contribute to influence Vietnamese public opinion on China.

A general impression of China as repressive and contemptuous of its smaller neighbour largely impedes Beijing's efforts to influence Vietnamese public opinion. Apparently realising this, China has lately favoured a top-down approach, focusing more on building relations with Vietnamese officials and elite-to-elite exchanges that allow for indirect management of the public view through local authorities. This strategy was validated in 2014, when the Vietnamese government restricted negative coverage of the PRC in state media, following tensions in South China Sea and the subsequent anti-Chinese demonstrations.

INFLUENCE IN THE MEDIA

All traditional and digital media is subject to state control in Vietnam. Print, broadcasting, and online news outlets are used as ideological instruments of the ruling party, which regulates all coverage of important socio-economic and political issues. Such is the level of oversight that China's influence via the media is inevitably inhibited.

National, provincial, or local party organisations directly supervise news output. The state's own news agency is briefed (though the government office) by the information department of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party, and all dissemination of that material depends on strict adherence to the original content.

As far as can be known within the parameters of this report, no Chinese agencies, companies or investors hold financial stakes or controlling interests in Vietnamese state media. English-language newspapers in Vietnam and China share content of regional interest under the auspices of the Asia News

⁴ Zhang Zhangwei, Lu Yiwen, "China-Vietnam educational cooperation and exchanges under the One Belt, One Road", 2nd June 2017, FX361.com (in Chinese), <http://www.fx361.com/page/2017/0602/1848489.shtml>

“ In sum, China’s influence over Vietnamese media is only felt indirectly, through manoeuvrings at political level.”

Network (ANN), while Mandarin-language newspapers, magazines and the like are widely available in Vietnam, but their effect on the native population is negligible.

In sum, China’s influence over Vietnamese media is only felt indirectly, through manoeuvrings at political level. If reporting on China has been generally more

positive in tone since 2014, this is a direct result of state-ordered modifications designed to minimise tensions, and to balance socialist solidarity with China against the strategic need to affirm territorial sovereignty. Reports on the conflicts in the South China Sea can still be condemnatory in tone, but anchors and editors tend to avoid the word “China” in such packages. A Chinese vessel colliding with Vietnamese fishing boats, for example, was duly described as “a foreign country’s ship”. The above-mentioned oil-rig incident of 2014 may also serve to illustrate Vietnam’s evolving reporting strategy vis-à-vis China. After the rig was deployed, then-Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung stated that Vietnam “will not trade sovereignty for some illusive friendship [with China]”. He was quoted widely by local news outlets, and on social media platforms, fanning public anger toward China that escalated into riots.⁵ The Vietnamese government swiftly directed all media to deemphasise anti-China sentiments, and present these demonstrations as displays of pro-Vietnamese patriotism. Similar editorial caution has been seen in reporting on alleged weaknesses of Chinese-funded projects, or inferiority of Chinese-made products.⁶

Social media is more difficult for the party/government to regulate than traditional news outlets. Facebook, Viber, and other platforms are very popular in Vietnam. However, a Cyber Security Law was enacted in January 2019 to tighten state control over those forums, and a number of Facebook and YouTube users were subsequently arrested for disseminating anti-government “propaganda”.

⁵ “Prime Minister: Do not trade sovereignty for illusory friendship”, Vnexpress, 22nd May 2014 (in Vietnamese), <https://vnexpress.net/thu-tuong-khong-danh-doi-chu-quyen-lay-huu-nghi-vien-vong-2994075.html>

⁶ “Despite poor quality, Chinese companies continuously win bids in Vietnam: Opportunities for Corruption”, VTC News, 24th May 2017 (in Vietnamese), <https://vtc.vn/chat-luong-thi-kem-vi-sao-trung-quoc-van-lien-tuc-trung-thau-o-viet-nam-ar324588.html>

Generally, China does not seem to be in a position to systematically influence Vietnamese social media users in any demonstrable way. Anecdotally, however, there are rumours that Chinese content-providers are using trend-savvy algorithms and eye-catching design to draw Vietnamese digital natives to pages that tend to make a comparatively subtle case for pro-PRC positions. The Weibo social network, popular in China, was mooted for launch in Vietnam, but the necessary license was not granted. TikTok is expanding its usership in Vietnam but Facebook remains far more popular.

ECONOMIC INFLUENCE

A vast disparity in wealth allows China great economic influence over Vietnam. At the same time, Vietnam's present growth phase has lasted over 30 years and counting, at a rate of six to seven percent per annum (though recently interrupted by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and slowing to three percent in 2020). Trade liberalisation, economic reforms, and high levels of foreign direct investment have made Vietnam a "lower middle-income country".

China has a clear strategy in promoting trade with Vietnam. The PRC was Vietnam's biggest trading partner in 2020, to a value of 132.5 billion US dollars⁷ (double the figure for 2014⁸, and equivalent to 24.4 percent of Vietnam's total trade). China ranks first in this Southeast Asian state in terms of imports, and second to the US in terms of exports, or third if the EU is included as a trading partner. Ideological similarities and compatible economic reform programmes help facilitate trade relations between China and Vietnam, which are also kept friction-free by policies of non-interference in the affairs of the partner country. Vietnam mainly imports textiles, machines, electronic equipment, and metal products from its neighbour, while exporting raw materials, agricultural produce, electronics, and low-tech manufactured goods such as clothing and shoes to China. A trade deficit is growing, and Vietnam's asymmetrical dependence on China weakens its bargaining power and scope for economic and political negotiation.

⁷ Calculated according to official data provided by Vietnam's General Department of Customs, <http://consosukien.vn/xuat-nhap-khau-viet-nam-mot-nam-no-luc-thanh-cong-cung-dat-nuoc.htm>

⁸ "Official Import and Export Turnover in 2014", General Statistics Office of Vietnam, <https://www.gso.gov.vn/du-lieu-va-so-lieu-thong-ke/2019/12/kim-ngach-hang-hoa-xuat-nhap-khau-chinh-thuc-nam-2014/>

Vietnam's industrial production relies heavily on China's supply chain. Intermediate goods accounted for 45 to 55 percent of its total imports from the PRC (consuming goods: 10 percent, capital goods: 30 percent) in 2014.⁹ Vietnam's imports from China are mainly items to be processed for onward export, thus any decline in imports from China would seriously affect Vietnam's export market.

As an investor China tends to fund key industrial sectors of Vietnam, including cement, steel, chemicals, and thermal energy. The resulting dependence puts the domestic economy at a disadvantage. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from China was limited before 2017 because the PRC's supply chain was more complete than Vietnam's, and the areas most attractive to Chinese investors (electronics, telecoms, automobiles, etc.) had been dominated by Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese enterprises, among others. Chinese FDI to Vietnam still accounts for a relatively small share in terms of total value and project scale (compared to Japan or South Korea), but that investment is now growing, as PRC enterprises establish new hubs for goods to be shipped to the US.

“ Ideological similarities and compatible economic reform programmes help facilitate trade relations between China and Vietnam, which are also kept friction-free by policies of non-interference in the affairs of the partner country.”

The number of Engineering Procurement and Construction (EPC) contracts as well as BOT projects (Build-Operate-Transfer) conducted by China accounts for a high proportion in some key areas. Chinese companies are for example particularly well represented in EPC activities involving minerals (87.5 percent of the contracts in this field are signed with Chinese firms) and fertilizer chemicals

⁹ Trần Toàn Thắng, Phạm Sỹ Thành et al., “Report on Vietnam - China Relations”, Aus4Reform (Australian Government), 2016, p. 57–58 (in Vietnamese), <http://aus4reform.org.vn/Thu-vien-bao-cao/Moi-truong-dau-tu-kinh-doanh/An-pham/bao-cao-quan-he-viet-nam--trung-quoc-437625/>

(60 percent).¹⁰ Production lines for EPC contracts are highly specialised, as equipment replacement and compulsory maintenance are responsibilities of the main contractor. That makes it difficult for Vietnam to switch contractors during an ongoing project, while contract costs and prices may begin low and soar at later stages. It is also important to note that the companies undertaking EPC/BOT projects are largely backed by the Chinese government.

Multilateral and bilateral free trade agreements like the EU-Vietnam FTA or the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) may be seen as a means of reducing this economic dependence on China. The diversifying effect of these mechanisms is somewhat negated, however, when China joins those same multilateral FTAs. Indeed, China has tried to attract Vietnam away from Japanese and ASEAN-led initiatives (e.g. Greater Mekong Subregion) by introducing Beijing-led alternatives linked to Chinese infrastructure and development projects like the BRI and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC). In those frameworks, infrastructure gaps are bridged with loans and construction spending, which in turn tend to widen the trade deficit. (Financing is provided by loans from Chinese banks and work is done by Chinese construction companies – materials, machines, and workers also come from China).

In conclusion, China has been an active investor and trading partner in Vietnam, making itself economically indispensable even while Vietnam attempts to offset that dependency.



The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)

The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) grew out of the former Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was invalidated by the withdrawal of the US in 2016, before being revived in this new form. At present the CPTPP has 11 signatories, with a combined GDP that makes it one of the largest free trade areas in the world. Only three of the five countries considered in this study are part of the agreement: Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

4

SUMMARY ANALYSIS AND CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

Dr. Céline-Agathe Caro



Students and teachers show off their calligraphy after a Chinese calligraphy event in conjunction with the upcoming Chinese Lunar New Year of the Pig, at Tsun Jin High School in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 18th January 2019.

Source: © Lai Seng Sin, Reuters

The comparative analysis of China's soft power projection in the five Southeast Asian neighbours selected for this study demonstrates that in four key areas – governance and diplomacy, education and culture, the media, and the economy – the PRC is making substantial efforts to raise its visibility, strengthen personal ties, defend its positions and interests, and present itself as an appealing, well-functioning nation and partner. Our examination of the data from 2014 to 2021 prompted the following observations:

CONTACTS AND CONNECTIONS REPRESENT A CORNERSTONE OF CHINA'S SOFT POWER PROJECTION

China has prioritized direct, person-to-person contacts in all four areas of focus. These range from state visits to academic exchanges to media training programmes and economic cooperation. Between 2014 and 2019, China sponsored significant exchange programs between Southeast Asian and Chinese citizens. At the highest level, China orchestrated reciprocal VIP visits on a near-annual basis. In implementing its global elite-to-elite diplomacy¹, China hosted heads of state and government from all five countries, and sent its own leaders for reciprocal visits in order to deepen bilateral ties and promote cooperative agreements in culture, education, and trade. In addition to these official visits, numerous regional platforms allowed policy makers from China and Southeast Asian nations to maintain regular contact, exchange views and discuss their respective positions on regional and international affairs.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership has also developed personal relationships with political elites in each country, particularly with ruling parties. This is true of Vietnam, where the general public is not always well-disposed towards China but the two governing communist parties consult and cooperate closely. In Cambodia and Thailand, the CCP has long fostered close relations with the respective royal families. In Malaysia, Chinese diplomats maintain close relationships with key figures such as Tun Rahah, the widow of late Prime Minister Tun Razak who first established that state's diplomatic relationship with China in 1974. And in Singapore, where the ties between the CCP and

¹ For an overview of the number of official visits involving China in East Asia and the Pacific between 2000 and 2015, see: Samantha Custer, Brooke Russell, Matthew DiLorenzo, Mengfan Cheng, Siddhartha Ghose, Harsh Desai, Jacob Sims, and Jennifer Turner, *Ties That Bind: Quantifying China's public diplomacy and its 'good neighbor' effect*, AidData, in partnership with Asia Society Policy Institute and CSIS, June 2018, p. 16 <https://www.aiddata.org/publications/ties-that-bind>

Singapore's ruling People's Action Party go back to 1992 – two years after the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between the two states – regular visits by elite CCP members reflect Singapore's value and importance to China.

In the academic field, an extensive number of scholarship programmes funded by the Chinese government permits many Southeast Asian students to study in the PRC, and sends Chinese nationals to study in Southeast Asia. Additional

“ Under the auspices of hospitality, foreign guests experience the PRC's carefully cultivated image of growth, development, and prosperity as they network with Chinese officials and professional peers.”

agreements between Chinese and foreign universities lead to further exchanges and research collaborations. Against this backdrop, China accounted for the largest share of foreign students in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic in all five countries selected for the study. Conversely, the number of foreign students from these five countries enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, training, and exchange

programmes in China rose slowly between 2014 and 2018, with the exception of Thailand, where the number of Thai students in China was higher than the average for ASEAN neighbouring countries and rising more rapidly.

China also invested extensively in building relationships with Southeast Asian journalists by offering generous training and travel opportunities, including a 10-month media exchange programme run by its Public Diplomacy Association. These initiatives allowed foreign journalists to come to China, meet with high-ranking Chinese officials, exchange views with Chinese academics, visit different parts of the country, discover the local culture, and occasionally intern at Chinese media organisations like Xinhua, China Daily, CGTN, or China Radio International.

As the case studies in the report demonstrate, officials, scholars, and journalists from the PRC's five Southeast Asian neighbours are invited to China every year. Under the auspices of hospitality, foreign guests experience the PRC's carefully cultivated image of growth, development, and prosperity as they network with Chinese officials and professional peers. Beijing's investment in such exchanges with decision-makers, potential future leaders, and opinion makers underlines

the number and diversity of soft power tools that the PRC is deploying in its five Southeast Asian neighbours.

CHINA CAPITALISES ON THE SIZE AND SPREAD OF ITS ETHNIC DIASPORA AND OVERSEAS CHINESE WHO TEND TO BOLSTER ITS SOFT POWER EFFORTS IN ALL FIVE COUNTRIES.

The size of Chinese communities varies widely among ASEAN members, ranging from less than one percent of the overall population in Vietnam to almost three quarters of all inhabitants in Singapore (74.4 percent). China repeatedly emphasized the importance of these blood-ties in its diplomatic outreach, especially in countries with large Chinese diaspora communities. This is the case for example in Thailand, where roughly 12–20 percent of the population is thought to be of Chinese descent, and who occupy an outsized presence among Thai business and social elites.

Large Chinese communities in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand serve as conduits through which wider societies become familiar with Chinese culture. Soap operas, movies, romantic novels and music, but also food, festivals and celebrations like Chinese New Year have thereby become part of the cultural fabric in neighbouring nations. Mere geographic and cultural proximity seems to explain the success of Chinese commercial popular culture in the case of Vietnam. This is notable in the otherwise generally PRC-averse public opinion in Vietnam.

Especially in Thailand and Singapore, business associations have acted as liaisons and helped strengthen bilateral ties – in the spirit of a “win-win” cooperation, following the official Chinese discourse. Their support includes sponsoring domestic efforts to study China and furthering political and business contacts. China expert Anne-Marie Brady estimated in 2017 that very few overseas Chinese associations worldwide were able to completely ignore “guidance” from the CCP.²

Local media outlets owned by business interests from within the diaspora often tend to focus more on China and feature (official) pro-China content. A famous example in the region is the *Sinchew Daily*, a leading Chinese-language

² Anne-Marie Brady, “Magic Weapons: China’s political influence activities under Xi Jinping”, Wilson Center, 18th September 2017, 58 pages, here p. 4, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/magic-weapons-chinas-political-influence-activities-under-xi-jinping>

newspaper in Malaysia owned by Tiong Hiew King, a businessman and billionaire of Chinese descent. This print media is moderately pro-PRC. The editorial positions of these local media outlets are not necessarily influenced by pressure or guidelines from the CCP and often reflect the political context and culture

in which they are published or the specific standpoint of their publishers. It is a general practice among Southeast Asian conglomerates that own national media to actively self-censor their reporting and editorial lines on Chinese topics in order to protect their larger business interests. The PRC has a well-established record of directly retaliating against national companies that take action that are inimical to its national interests, the experience of South Korean conglomerate Lotte being a prime example.³

“ It is a general practice among Southeast Asian conglomerates that own national media to actively self-censor their reporting and editorial lines on Chinese topics in order to protect their larger business interests.”

THE PRC SEEKS TO INCREASE ITS ATTRACTIVENESS ABROAD, USING TRADE AND ECONOMIC INVESTMENTS ALSO FOR SOFT POWER PURPOSES

Economic ties between the PRC and its five neighbours in Southeast Asia have substantially increased since 2014. China's growing status as a major trading partner, significant investor, initiator of the BRI, and leading source of foreign tourists has prompted many in the region to learn Mandarin for the sake of career advancement.

In addition to local public and private initiatives, China offers free or low-cost Mandarin instruction through its Confucius Institutes (CI) and Classrooms (CC). Among the five Southeast Asian countries, Beijing has focused its attention on

³ Cynthia Kim, Hyunjoo Jin, "With China dream shattered over missile land deal, Lotte faces costly overhaul", Reuters, 25th October 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lotte-china-analysis-idUSKBN1CT35Y>

countries where Chinese is less commonly spoken, with the highest number of Confucius Institutes (plus associate branches) and Classrooms currently found in Thailand and Cambodia. The main objective of this policy is to engage non-Chinese speakers by teaching basic-level Mandarin and introducing the students to “soft” cultural subjects such as popular Chinese songs, traditions, and calligraphy. Learning and speaking Chinese leads to a deeper and wider exposure to cultural features and developments in the Middle Kingdom, allowing Beijing to sensitise foreigners to subjects of its choice, and to enhance its overall appeal as an advanced, modern nation with a millennia-old civilisation.

Notably, the Confucius Institutes are embedded in campuses of universities. In general, they supply volunteer teachers and teaching materials for the local department of Chinese studies and fund events at their host universities, like book launches and academic conferences on China. Through these institutes, Beijing manages to influence, if not control, local academic discourse about China.

BRI projects and other economic investments allow the People’s Republic to present itself in the region as a prosperous state and strategic partner that will help modernize its neighbours, improve life on the ground, and create growth and prosperity for all. From a strategic perspective, the PRC’s geopolitical and economic interests for these infrastructure and other mega projects – like the Pan-Asia Railway network or the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone in Cambodia – are largely in line with the connectivity and development ambitions of ASEAN and its members. These BRI projects are often popular among Southeast Asian elites also because they demonstrate to the world the appeal of specific local areas in their countries. They also reinforce the legitimacy of participating governments both domestically and internationally by demonstrating that the country can successfully participate in international initiatives.

Chinese ownership of local media outlets and content sharing agreements between Chinese and local news agencies are common in the five countries of this study, especially in Cambodia (acquisition of local media) and in Thailand (content sharing). Such arrangements allow business interests and political leaders in the PRC to have a powerful influence on coverage and editorial lines, which can have a substantial impact on the perception of China among local audiences.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Is China's Soft Power Projection Successful in the Five Southeast Asian Countries of this Study?

Dr. Céline-Agathe Caro



Founded in 1958, CCTV (China Central Television) is directly controlled by the propaganda department of the Chinese Communist Party. Citizens in Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam have access to CCTV and other Chinese state-run broadcasters through local TV and satellite packages.

Source: © Chintung Lee, Shutterstock

CHINA'S APPEAL AND ITS GROWING INFLUENCE

This study demonstrates that the PRC under President Xi Jinping has successfully developed and implemented a multifaceted outreach strategy in all four of the areas considered – governance and diplomacy, education and culture, the media, and the economy. This has allowed the PRC to increase its overall footprint, strengthen its influence, and in some cases its appeal, in the five Southeast Asian neighbours. Beijing's "host diplomacy" as well as its scholarship programmes, its media investments, and its economic engagement in the region appear to be especially effective tools in obtaining its objectives.

It is difficult to evaluate whether the PRC's "host diplomacy", with numerous invitations to political leaders, party officials, students, academics, and journalists, directly translates into producing soft power gains: visitors who return from their trips in China with an improved image of the country and a willingness to actively contribute to its international prestige. But this approach certainly appears to have built important relationships in key sectors and improved the PRC's influence in the region, as well as its image as an influential country. It is well-documented that in the context of political (or business) negotiations with foreign representatives, this strategy aims to produce so-called "old friends" – interpersonal relationships with mutual obligations helping the Chinese side achieve its objectives.¹ China experts also underline that China's elite-to-elite diplomacy can resonate quite well in countries in East Asia and the Pacific, where relations with the West can be strained by its values-oriented diplomacy. Beijing's policy of non-interference in its neighbours' domestic affairs, its top-down control of development, and its policy of limiting calls for political reform in favour of economic progress fits particularly well with the range of blended authoritarian/democratic systems in the region.²

Growth in trade, coupled with large investment projects like BRI initiatives, and a high number of Chinese tourists eager to travel the world also contribute to the PRC's appeal as a partner, and improve its status among the selected Southeast Asian countries. Moreover, China's strategy to showcase its socio-economic

¹ See for example, David Lampton et al., *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia*, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

² See for example Joshua Kurlantzick, "China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia", *Current History*, University of California Press, September 2006, Volume 105, Issue 692, p. 270–276, here p. 272, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2006.105.692.270>

achievements, especially by communicating extensively about its ability to lift millions of people out of poverty has certainly proven effective. It generates respect and demonstrates the appeal of its model, especially in circles where strong leadership or economic interventionism are well regarded. Popular Chinese brands and companies in Southeast Asia, like Oppo, Vivo, Xiaomi, and Huawei for the smartphone market³, also do their share to cultivate a positive image of China abroad.

“ Pro-Beijing news reporting in Chinese state-run broadcasters and in local media outlets with ties to China help persuade the public to accept the truthfulness and validity of PRC messaging.”

In terms of influence, the PRC's military power helps define China as a major player who must be taken seriously by its neighbours. Especially in Cambodia, Malaysia, and Thailand, China has developed an extensive ecosystem of media that relay its messages. Pro-Beijing news reporting in Chinese state-run broadcasters (like CCTV and CRI) and in local media outlets with ties to China help persuade the public to accept the truthfulness and validity of PRC messaging. The long-term benefits are potentially substantial, particularly in China's ability to use local media to inform and influence discourse on foreign policy issues that touch on its own interests. A recent example of how China uses that network to its own benefit can be seen in mounting evidence that Chinese messaging on the war in Ukraine has persuaded publics in the region to be more accepting of Russian (and Chinese) propaganda regarding the justification for that conflict.

³ "Chinese smartphone brands take 62% of Southeast Asia's 30.7 million shipments", Canalys, Shanghai (China), Bengaluru (India), Singapore, Reading (UK) and Portland (US), 15th August 2019, <https://www.canalys.com/newsroom/southeast-asia-smartphone-marketshare-Q22019>

The most tangible success of China's soft power projection is certainly in the cultural field, from Chinese "classics" to popular entertainment. The first category includes Chinese classical literature and music, Confucianism, traditional medicine and festivals, cuisine, calligraphy, architecture, and martial arts, among others – all traditional elements of Chinese culture and society that are immediately identifiable as typically Chinese by a broad audience. The second category includes giant pandas, popular (and occasionally chauvinistic) movies and TV shows, romantic novels, or internet celebrities like YouTube star Li Ziqi, who shares her idealised traditional rural lifestyle with millions of followers worldwide. These non-political aspects of Chinese culture remain China's most successful tools for exercising soft power because of their broad popularity among large segments of Southeast Asian societies.

THE LIMITS OF CHINA'S STRATEGY

The case studies all conclude that China's effective cultural diplomacy (with classic literature, festivals, TV shows, etc.) does not translate into deference toward the PRC as a global actor, stronger support for its political and economic model, or acceptance of its regional and international policies. In other words, the immediate return on investment for China's soft power projection in this field is arguably limited, at least at the moment, in terms of direct foreign policy gains.

The PRC also struggles to increase its appeal in fields where other states, especially Western countries or Japan and Korea, are well established. This is the case for academic exchange programmes where opinion polls show that Chinese universities are less popular than the competition in the United States, the UK, the EU, or Australia. The only noticeable exception in this area seems to be Cambodia, where China is by far the top preference for tertiary education abroad.⁴ The same is true for tourism: In 2021, the most popular holiday destinations in the five countries of our study were Japan, the EU, and ASEAN member states. China was mentioned in the Top 3 only in Cambodia – in first place.⁵ Other examples include sustained interest in study of European and other foreign languages, pop culture, lifestyle and sport, or new technologies and

⁴ Sharon Seah et al., *The States of Southeast Asia: 2022*, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2022, p. 53, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2022-survey-report/>

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

brands like in the automotive sector where the “made in Germany” or “designed in California” are still excellent selling points.

China can sometimes undermine its soft power efforts in the region with its own business practices, security policy in the South China Sea, or political assertiveness towards foreign partners. For example, economic investments in the five countries of this study don't necessarily improve China's local image, as the implementation of many mega projects results in popular resentment because of concerns over sovereignty issues, the dangers of “debt trap diplomacy”, negative environmental and social impacts, the lack of employment opportunities for local workers, technological issues, and resulting legal disputes. Soft power is of little help when China's actions begin to threaten essential economic, security, or political interests of its Southeast Asian partners and their publics.

Chinese tourists are welcome in the countries of this study because they stimulate economic growth, but their absence during the COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the economic dependence of several states in this regard and the negative impact of mass tourism on the environment.

China has attempted to use vaccine diplomacy to promote its soft power, while responding to critics with “wolf warrior” combativeness. Such tactics have not always yielded favourable results. Despite being delivered early in the five countries of this study, Chinese inactivated vaccines soon proved to be less popular than other alternatives. Publics were acutely aware that Chinese vaccines were less effective than those provided by the West, and were also aware that with few exceptions these were not donations – their governments purchased them from China at premium prices. Ambassadorial “wolf warrior” tactics have often provoked mockery or resistance in some areas – as seen with the emergence of the so-called Milk Tea Alliance among “netizens” of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, and other ASEAN countries. In Thailand, when the newly arrived Chinese ambassador posted comments on Facebook accusing the Thai public of damaging relations and “hurting the feelings of the Chinese people” by criticizing the Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines, Thai netizens were not amused.

Finally, China's attempts at using social media as a platform for soft power projection often fail to reach or convince younger audiences, and often provoke mockery. The reasons are simple: Beijing's overly controlled communication is heavily charged with ideology (think of the promotion of *The Governance of China* by Xi Jinping). It aims to promote China's state narratives and national priorities

“ China’s attempts at using social media as a platform for soft power projection often fail to reach or convince younger audiences, and often provoke mockery.”

abroad, and focusses on technologies from the 20th century (Chinese state-run broadcasters, acquisition of local media outlets, op-eds, book presentations). For many young people in Southeast Asia, this is simply neither “fun” nor credible, and it doesn’t generate much attention, or “likes”, online.

INFLUENCE VERSUS TRUST

The main findings of this study, based on quantitative data, are consistent with other recent research projects and opinion polls in the region (qualitative data). For example, the first edition of the China Index, produced by Doublethink Lab in cooperation with National Taipei University and other local academic partners, measured China’s influence in 36 countries and territories on all continents, from March to August 2021, and focused on nine domains: the media, foreign policy, academia, domestic politics, economy, technology, society, military, and law enforcement. Of the 36 countries evaluated (as of April 2022), it assessed Cambodia, Singapore and Thailand, respectively, as being the top three countries most exposed to China’s influence, while Malaysia ranked 8th and Vietnam 26th.⁶

The ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore measures opinions annually among representatives of government, academia, civil society, NGOs, the media, and the private sector in ASEAN. The latest qualitative survey conducted in November/December 2021 found that only 37.16 percent of the respondents in the five countries of this report are either “confident” (25.8 percent) or “very confident” (11.36 percent) that China will “do the right thing” to contribute to global peace,

⁶ Doublethink Lab, *China Index 2021*, <https://china-index.io/>

security, prosperity and governance.⁷ Interestingly, this percentage of confidence is higher than the ASEAN average (26.8 percent) and higher than the previous year (19.3 percent), in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the level of trust towards China was highest by far in Cambodia (74 percent), lowest in Singapore (16.3 percent) and Vietnam (24.3 percent), and more moderate in Malaysia (37 percent) and Thailand (34.2 percent).

“ Only 37.16 percent of the respondents in the five countries of this report are “confident” or “very confident” that China will “do the right thing” to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity and governance.”

Those who trust China in Cambodia attribute this first to the PRC’s “vast economic resources and strong political will to provide global leadership”. Those who distrust China in Singapore (69.8 percent of respondents) and Vietnam (64.6 percent) name two primary reasons: the fact that “China’s economic and military power could be used to threaten [their] country’s interest and sovereignty” (the first reason mentioned in Vietnam) and the fact that they “do not consider China a responsible or reliable power” (the first reason in Singapore). In Malaysia and Thailand, those who trust China primarily cite the PRC’s economic resources and political will to provide global leadership, as in Cambodia, whereas those who distrust China share Singapore’s and Vietnam’s concerns.

Similar tendencies can be observed in response to COVID-19 vaccines: Chinese brands are most trusted in Cambodia (where 67.9 percent of the respondents name Sinopharm or Sinovac as their preferred brand) and least trusted in Vietnam (4.2 percent) and Singapore (4.5 percent), whereas Thailand (17.1 percent) and Malaysia (23.7 percent) are closer to the average (23.48 percent).⁸

⁷ Sharon Seah et al., *The States of Southeast Asia: 2022*, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2022, p. 42–43, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2022-survey-report/>

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Among those who trust the PRC in the five countries, “respect [for] China” and “[admiration] for its civilisation and culture” are rarely primary considerations for their opinion. This point is mentioned only by a small share of respondents in the latest ISEAS survey (13.9 percent in Singapore, 12 percent in Malaysia, 10 percent in Cambodia, 7.5 percent in Thailand, and 2.9 percent in Vietnam). The vast majority of respondents focus on economic, military, and political arguments.⁹

LET IT GO

In terms of strategies, the pro-active, top-down method of Chinese leadership to generate a positive image of China abroad contradicts Professor Joseph Nye’s prevailing definition of soft power, as an asset of a state that influences others by virtue of its own inherent appeal. In that sense, for the American sinologist David Shambaugh, the PRC’s approach is more accurately defined as public diplomacy than real soft power.¹⁰

In July 2015, both Joseph Nye and David Shambaugh analysed the limits of Chinese soft power. Nye wrote that “China has emphasized its cultural and economic strengths, but it has paid less attention to the political aspects that can undermine its efforts”. In his view, two factors limit the PRC’s soft power – its nationalistic approach, with assertive narratives that often antagonize target audiences, and the government’s intention to be the predominant source of soft power, focusing on traditional culture and often using propaganda tools abroad.¹¹ Shambaugh simply called China’s soft power agenda “external propaganda”.¹² At the time, Nye and Shambaugh both came to the conclusion that China’s global appeal will only improve if the PRC’s leadership accepts to unleash the full talent of the Chinese civil society, let people and companies freely innovate and be visible abroad. As Shambaugh puts it: “the Chinese government

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰ China Power Team (CSIS), “Is China’s Soft Power Strategy Working?”, Discussion with Joseph S. Nye Jr., Liz Economy, David Shambaugh, CSIS, 27 February 2016, <https://chinapower.csis.org/is-chinas-soft-power-strategy-working/>

¹¹ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “The Limits of Chinese Soft Power”, *Project Syndicate*, 10th July 2015, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-civil-society-nationalism-soft-power-by-joseph-s-nye-2015-07>

¹² David Shambaugh, “China’s Soft-Power Push. The Search for Respect”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2015, Volume 94, Number 4, p. 99–107, here p.100. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-16/chinas-soft-power-push>

approaches public diplomacy the same way it constructs high-speed rail or builds infrastructure – by investing money and expecting to see development. (...) Soft power cannot be bought. It must be earned.”¹³

Our study shows that more than half a decade later, the Chinese leadership continues to implement the same playbook with its five neighbours in Southeast Asia, using top-down methods to try to control information and opinions about China in the region, without enabling individuals, the private sector, and Chinese civil society to participate freely in the process. This strategy produces mixed outcomes in terms of international appeal. It remains to be seen if Beijing will dare in the future to “get out of its own way” to unlock the full potential of its soft power. China’s international media policy, the broad deployment of “wolf warrior” tactics by its diplomats, and pressures on foreign celebrities to affirm “One China” suggest that for the time being, a strategic shift in this area is not on the agenda of the CCP.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

5

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GERMANY AND THE EU

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GERMANY AND THE EU



The flag of the European Union (R.) stands beside the flag of the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the flags of the 10 member countries during the ASEAN-EU ministerial meeting in Singapore on 23rd July 2008. The ASEAN members are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Source: © Romeo Gacad / Pool New, Reuters

An analysis of Chinese soft power in Southeast Asia is of potential interest for the EU and its member states in their own efforts to project soft power and enhance their appeal in the region. Fortunately, the EU benefits from high levels of trust reported among the publics in the focal countries in this study. EU leadership on human rights and environmental issues, as well as its image as a responsible stakeholder that respects and upholds international law, have resulted in large plurality of Southeast Asian publics to trust that its countries will “do the right thing” to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance.¹ We conclude with a few policy recommendations for the EU and for Germany specifically, derived from observations in this study, to encourage European soft power gains in Southeast Asia.

1. INVEST IN HIGH-LEVEL DIPLOMATIC VISITS

Leaders in Europe and Germany should prioritize high-level visits to the countries of Southeast Asia, a region that is largely treated as an afterthought. Face-to-face diplomacy is important to build trust and strengthen ties, and to show that Europe sees ASEAN countries as significant partners. News coverage generated by such visits would also make the EU more visible and deliver a fundamental message of respect to Southeast Asian publics.

Head of State and ministerial-level visits would also be a first step to show that recent initiatives like the EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership (December 2020), the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (October 2021) and the EU's Global Gateway strategy (December 2021) are not just aspirational documents. With the global COVID-19 crisis receding, high-level, in-person visits should resume, as there is little media or public diplomacy benefit in the region from virtual meetings, whatever their level.

2. LEVERAGE THE “THIRD WAY” APPROACH

Together with ASEAN, the EU and Germany can offer an alternative to the increasing bipolar tensions between China and the US that many countries in the region feel. Both sides have set the foundations for this with their inclusive

¹ Sharon Seah et al., *The States of Southeast Asia: 2022*, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2022, p. 44–45 and p. 26–27, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2022-survey-report/>

approaches to the region – German Guidelines, EU Indo-Pacific Strategy, ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) – which are distinct from exclusive Free and Open Indo-Pacific concepts. Cooperation with either China or the US is often seen (in particular by the two rivals) as choosing a side – something most countries in the region are desperately trying to avoid. Soft power, and the already high trust in European actors to provide cooperation outside of these bipolar constraints could be leveraged by doubling down on this inclusive, multilateral approach.

Opinion polls in 2020 and 2021 shows that the EU is the top choice – among representatives of government, academia, civil society, NGOs, the media, and the private sector in ASEAN – as a trusted strategic partner to hedge against the uncertainties of the US-China strategic rivalry. This is particularly true for the five selected countries of this study: Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.² The EU should build on this trust, otherwise Japan – the second most trusted partner behind the EU – might soon take the lead.

3. COOPERATE CLOSELY ON COMMON PRESSING ISSUES

The EU must follow through its announced intentions towards the Indo-Pacific, as well as its ambitions in terms of Green Deal and Global Gateway, and seek closer cooperation with countries in Southeast Asia beyond its focus on trade and maritime security. This includes working with the private sector and governments in ASEAN to boost trade and economic growth after the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthen digitalization, develop soft and hard infrastructure, mitigate climate change, and work towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals. For example: Using the “Team Europe” approach, European initiatives could pull together resources from the private and public sector and provide real and green alternatives to the BRI.

Such an approach would contribute to strengthening cooperation in the region outside of Sino-American tensions and to positioning the EU as a third force that plays a constructive role for development of the region with policies that directly benefit the populations on the ground. Several countries in Southeast Asia are reform-oriented and would value a more concrete cooperation with the EU on common challenges.

² *Ibid.*, p. 32–33.

4. GO BEYOND DEVELOPMENT AID

In the long run, Europe should move beyond a donor-recipient relation with Southeast Asian countries – dependence is not a foundation for a healthy relationship – and ensure a level playing field. For this, the focus should be on closer trade and investment relations, with a commitment to clear principles regarding rule of law, good governance, human rights, sustainability, openness and reciprocity. Both sides should aspire to the establishment of a region-to-region FTA, favour European FDI and the right framework for it, and phase-out development aid.

5. MAKE EXISTING COOPERATION MECHANISMS MORE RELEVANT

To boost their diplomatic and technical cooperation, the EU and ASEAN should overhaul or strengthen existing mechanisms such as cooperation platforms like ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) or the ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum). This would create more collaborative interactions between the two regions and also give more opportunities for the Europeans and Southeast Asians to directly discuss their positions and principles on different regional and international issues.

More engagement between people at the non-governmental or so-called “Track Two” and “Track Three” levels would also benefit the EU and the ASEAN. This would offer more channels of direct communication, help deepen bilateral cooperation, and build important institutional and civil-society relationships.

6. INCREASE STUDENT/ACADEMIC EXCHANGES

The EU should focus on Southeast Asia to implement the objectives of the EU Indo-Pacific strategy and Global Gateway in the field of scholarships, education and research. Europe is a dream destination for many students in the region, but several obstacles like the lack of funding and scholarships as well as administrative hurdles in the admission and visa processes must be reduced to allow more Southeast Asian students to make that a reality.

The EU needs more academic programs with English as the language of instruction so that foreign students can easily join. Compared to the US and the UK, universities in the EU are still less attractive in Southeast Asia. More

involvement in promotional events and direct engagements with educational institutions in the region would increase their visibility and popularity.

To strengthen person-to-person ties, students and academics of exchange programs should be offered more opportunities – through extra curricula programs – to meet and network with policy makers, local leaders or representatives of the media and the business sector in Europe.

7. WORK WITH LOCAL INFLUENCERS

The EU and Germany should work more with key influencers in Southeast Asia, including academics in universities and think tanks, journalists, civil society leaders, and social media personalities. This would help make the EU and its member states more visible in the region and promote Europe's political values and norms as well as its foreign and development policies. The focus should be on topics of common interest like climate action and environmental protection, connectivity in the fields of energy, transport and digital technology, or food security and the prevention of pandemics.

While the EU is a major investor in sustainable and environmental projects in Southeast Asia, this is not widely known among local populations. The most important target audience for such outreach should be younger generations who are “global citizens”, more connected internationally, more fluent in English than their forebears, and who have greater receptivity to a multilateral and values-based approach to solving problems.

8. CATEGORIZE CHINA'S OPERATIONS OF INFLUENCE

The Chinese influence efforts described in this study – and observed elsewhere in the world – fall within a wide spectrum of actions. Some are legal and legitimate (like regular diplomatic activity), others are legal but “ill-spirited”. In some cases, they can also be illegal. It would be useful for Europe and Germany to monitor and categorize these operations of influence for several reasons.

China has legitimate national interests that it has every right to advance using legal methods that observe internationally accepted practices for diplomatic activity. Complaining about Chinese methods that are legal, and that other countries use as well, would show a bias that undermines our own image and

commitment to freedom of expression in the long run. More importantly, carefully monitoring and documenting China's soft power, media, and public diplomacy activities would promote transparency and create awareness among political leaders, the media, and the general public about Chinese influence tactics, especially those that are affiliated with foreign interference, propaganda and disinformation efforts. This could strengthen resilience in the affected societies and encourage lawmakers to take legal action to prohibit certain practices. Lastly, this monitoring and mapping could lead to a guide to help governments and citizens recognize and effectively respond to China's influence efforts by stating how to react to each type of actions. Ideally, all EU member states could use this guide to develop a common response.

APPENDIX



CHINA'S PERSPECTIVE ON GOVERNMENTAL COOPERATION WITH ASEAN AND ITS MEMBERS

Dr. Tingjian Cai



This regional study focusses on Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. This group consists of relatively small countries, most with land-links to their much larger northern neighbour, and characterized by centuries of exchanges with China. It has also been a nexus of contested power between China and the US, from the Cold War to the present day.

Source: © crystal51, Shutterstock

In September 2016, Premier Li Keqiang spoke at the 19th China-ASEAN (10+1) Leaders' Meeting and the 25th Anniversary Summit of China-ASEAN Dialogue. In that speech, he affirmed China as one of the most important dialogue partners of Southeast Asian countries, underlining the "five firsts": The People's Republic was the first external country to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia; the first to explicitly support the central position of ASEAN in regional cooperation; the first to establish a strategic partnership with ASEAN; the first to publicly express its willingness to sign the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty with ASEAN; and the first to start a Free Trade Agreement negotiation process with ASEAN, thereby demonstrating a willingness to promote relations with Southeast Asia and establish "win-win" cooperation.¹ In a later speech at the ASEAN Secretariat in May 2018, Li Keqiang said that in 16 years of strategic partnership between China and ASEAN, China has prioritized Southeast Asia in its neighbouring diplomacy and firmly developed friendly cooperation with the states of that region. He also emphasised that China has shown willingness to work with ASEAN in five key areas: common development, peacebuilding, openness, and innovation as well as tolerance and mutual appreciation. To that end, he stressed, the PRC has committed to deepening its cooperation with ASEAN at several levels.²

First, in a speech to the Indonesian parliament on 3rd October 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced his intention to build a 21st century "Maritime Silk Road" with ASEAN, and proposed the establishment of a closer China-ASEAN "community of destiny". At the National University of Singapore on 7th November 2015, President Xi Jinping restated and expanded that goal, referring to "an Asian community of destiny".³

China and ASEAN have had some success in realising this promise. Advances include the implementation of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), some bilateral Free Trade Agreements, the effective strategic alignment of the Belt and Road Initiative with ASEAN development plans, the launch of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) on 1st January 2022, consultations

¹ Speech by Premier Li Keqiang at the 19th China-ASEAN (10+1) Leaders' Meeting and the 25th Anniversary Summit of China-ASEAN Dialogue, Chinese Government Network, www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2016-09/08/content_5106318.htm

² Keynote speech by Premier Li Keqiang at the ASEAN Secretariat, Xinhua News, www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-05/08/content_5289143.htm

³ Xi Jinping's "One Belt, One Road" Footprint, People's Network, www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/wh/slx/ygcyll/Document/1490757/1490757_2.htm

on a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, and, latterly, cooperative responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. On 28th April 2019, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen signed an Action Plan for Building the China-Cambodia Community of Common Destiny, and on 30th April 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Lao President Bounnhang Vorachith also signed an Action Plan for Building the China-Lao Community of Common Destiny.

Second, China is demonstrably committed to consolidating strategic partnerships in the region. Since 2013, its Belt and Road Initiative has made considerable progress in aligning with the development plans of ASEAN member states. On 14th November 2018, the 21st China-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting and the 15th Anniversary Summit of the China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity adopted the China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership Vision 2030. The stated aim of this initiative is "to promote an open and inclusive world with lasting peace, security, common prosperity, and sustainable development".⁴ On 3rd November 2019, the 22nd China-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting issued the "China-ASEAN Joint Statement on the Cooperation between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025", which called for even greater and more institutionalised mutual support at the regional level.⁵

Thirdly, the PRC has stated a commitment to peace and stable development in the South China Sea. Since the mid-1990s, China has negotiated with ASEAN countries on a "Code of Conduct in the South China Sea", which led to the "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea" of 2002. In September 2013, the Sixth Senior Officials Meeting on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea was held in China to formally launch the consultation process. On 7th September 2016, the 19th China-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting adopted the "Guidelines for Hotline Communications among Senior Officials of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of China and ASEAN Member States in Response to Maritime Emergencies" and the "Joint Statement of China and ASEAN Countries on the Application of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea in the South China Sea". At present, consultations on the "Code of Conduct in the South China Sea" are still steadily taking place.

⁴ China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership Vision 2030, People's Network, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2018/1116/c1002-30403505.html>

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Furthermore, the PRC has made mutually beneficial economic cooperation one of its main objectives in the ASEAN region. Recent years have seen the effective alignment of China's Belt and Road Initiative with Thailand's Modernization 4.0 strategy, Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), and National Development Strategy (2019–2038), Vietnam's Two Corridors and One Economic Circle strategy, Cambodia's Rectangular Strategy, Malaysia's National Development Plan, and Singapore's Future Economic Development Strategy. Cooperation on infrastructure has given rise to commercial corridors, special economic zones, and industrial parks. Concrete, viable platforms for collaboration include the ASEAN Smart Cities Network.

Lastly, China's social and cultural exchanges with Southeast Asian neighbours tend to function as extensions of diplomacy by way of religion, the media, science and technology, or public policy. For example, the 22nd China-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting adopted the Joint Statement on Strengthening Media Exchanges and Cooperation. In October 2020, the China-ASEAN Media Cooperation Forum further deepened their cooperation in the media field.

Main Sources for the Figures and Tables

(KAS rechecked all links on 19th–20th May 2022)

FIGURES

Figure 1: Visits of state and government leaders to China

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China

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Figure 2: High-level visits (2014–2019)

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China

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- Singapore, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2777_663548/2779_663552/
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Figure 3: Size of Chinese diplomatic network compared to the US

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- Singapore
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 - US, <https://sg.usembassy.gov/>
- Thailand
 - China, <http://www.chinaembassy.or.th/eng/>
 - US, <https://th.usembassy.gov/>
- Vietnam
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Figure 4: Vaccines acquisitions between January and July 2021

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Figure 5: Percentage of Chinese students among all foreign students enrolled in higher education

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 - Official Portal of the Ministry of Higher Education (in Malay), <https://www.mohe.gov.my/muat-turun/statistik>
- Singapore
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 - New destination for international students (in Vietnamese), <https://nhandan.com.vn/baothoinay-xahoi-songtre/diem-den-moi-cua-sinh-vien-quoc-te-579589>

Figure 6: Number of foreign students from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries in China

	Cambodia	Malaysia	Singapore	Thailand	Vietnam
2014	/	6,645	/	21,296	10,658
2015	1,829	6,650	4,865	19,976	10,031
2016	2,250	6,880	4,983	23,044	10,639
2017	3,016	7,948	5,259	27,884	11,311
2018	4,047	9,479	4,718	28,608	11,299

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Figure 7: Number of Confucius Institutes (CI) and size of Chinese diaspora
Figure 8: Number of Confucius Classrooms (CC)

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 - Diaspora
Estimation of the in-country researcher based on personal communication with the Association of Khmer-Chinese (AKC), 5th May 2021 (no official statistics)
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Figure 9: Chinese acquisition or ownership of local media outlets

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 - Personal Communication between the in-country researcher and a media expert, 4th May 2021
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Figure 10: Content sharing agreements between Chinese news agencies and local news outlets

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Figure 11: Share of FDI from China compared with total FDI

	Cambodia	Malaysia	Singapore	Thailand	Vietnam
	Share	Share	Share	Share	Share
2014	32.6%	7.4%	4.1%	7.9%	3.6%
2015	32.8%	5.2%	15%	5.7%	4.7%
2016	24.4%	8.1%	4.7%	14.9%	10.2%
2017	22.8%	7.1%	6.3%	4.9%	5.4%
2018	24.8%	24.6%	7.7%	12.8%	7.4%
2019	30.4%	18.6%	4.0%	26.2%	10.2%

- Cambodia
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- Malaysia
 - Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA): Data calculated based on Approved Private Investments in Various Economic Sectors, <https://www.mida.gov.my/why-malaysia/investment-statistics/>
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Figure 12: China FDI stock in the year 2020 (Case Study Cambodia)

- Cambodia
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Figure 13: Top products imported from China by value (Case Study Cambodia)

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 - Data extracted by the in-country researcher from trade statistics provided by the Cambodian Ministry of Commerce, 2021

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- Singapore: <http://sg.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/>
- Thailand: <http://th.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/ztbd/>
- Vietnam: <http://vn.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/>

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 - Personal Communication of the in-country researcher with a media expert, 4th May 2021
- Malaysia
 - CCTV: <https://content.astro.com.my/channels/CCTV4-HD-385>
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 - CCTV/CGTN: <https://www.starhub.com/personal/entertainment/tv-plans-add-on-packs.html>
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- Thailand
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Table 4: Share of two-way trade with China compared with total international trade volume

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 - Total imports: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/MYS/StartYear/2014/EndYear/2019/TradeFlow/Import/Partner/WLD/Indicator/MPRT-TRD-VL>
 - Total exports: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/MYS/StartYear/2014/EndYear/2019/TradeFlow/Export/Partner/WLD/Indicator/XPRT-TRD-VL>

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- Total imports: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/SGP/StartYear/2014/EndYear/2019/TradeFlow/Import/Partner/WLD/Indicator/MPRT-TRD-VL>
- Total exports: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/SGP/StartYear/2014/EndYear/2019/TradeFlow/Export/Partner/WLD/Indicator/XPRT-TRD-VL>

- Thailand: <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/THA>
 - Imports from China: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/THA/StartYear/2014/EndYear/2019/TradeFlow/Import/Partner/CHN/Indicator/MPRT-TRD-VL>
 - Exports to China: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/THA/StartYear/2014/EndYear/2019/TradeFlow/Export/Partner/CHN/Indicator/XPRT-TRD-VL>
 - Total imports: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/THA/StartYear/2014/EndYear/2019/TradeFlow/Import/Partner/WLD/Indicator/MPRT-TRD-VL>
 - Total exports: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/THA/StartYear/2014/EndYear/2019/TradeFlow/Export/Partner/WLD/Indicator/XPRT-TRD-VL>

- Vietnam: <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/VNM>
 - Imports from China: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/VNM/StartYear/2014/EndYear/2019/TradeFlow/Import/Partner/CHN/Indicator/MPRT-TRD-VL>
 - Exports to China: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/VNM/StartYear/2014/EndYear/2019/TradeFlow/Export/Partner/CHN/Indicator/XPRT-TRD-VL>
 - Total imports: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/VNM/StartYear/2014/EndYear/2019/TradeFlow/Import/Partner/WLD/Indicator/MPRT-TRD-VL>
 - Total exports: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/VNM/StartYear/2014/EndYear/2019/TradeFlow/Export/Partner/WLD/Indicator/XPRT-TRD-VL>

Table 5: Most prominent BRI projects

- Cambodia
 - Lower Se San 2 Dam: Lower Sesan II dam opens, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/lower-sesan-ii-dam-opens>

- Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone: Cambodia to establish Sihanoukville multi-purpose Special Economic Zone, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50963361/cambodia-to-establish-sihanoukville-multi-purpose-special-economic-zone/>
 - Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway: Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville expressway 70 percent completed, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50987282/phnom-penh-sihanoukville-expressway-70-percent-completed/>
 - Siem Reap International Airport: New Siem Reap international airport 42 per cent complete, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50856711/new-siem-reap-international-airport-42-per-cent-complete/>
- Malaysia:
 - Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park, https://www.ecerd.com.my/media_releases/malaysia-china-kuantan-industrial-park-mckip-seals-investment-worth-rm1-58-billion-from-china-and-malaysia/
 - East Coast Rail Link: East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), https://www.brimonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CS_ECRL.pdf; ECRL project reaches 30% progress mark, says MRL CEO, <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/ecrl-project-reaches-30-progress-mark-says-mrl-ceo>
- Singapore
 - Data compiled by in-country researcher
- Thailand
 - Bangkok-Nong Khai high-speed railway: David M. Lampton, Selina Ho and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia*, University of California Press, California, 2020, p. 136
- Vietnam
 - Vinh Tan 1 Coal Plant, <https://ppi.worldbank.org/en/snapshots/project/vinh-tan-1-coal-plant-7247>

Table 6: Number and share of Chinese tourists compared with the total number of foreign tourists

- Cambodia
 - Cambodia Tourism Statistic, <https://www.tourismcambodia.com/tourist-information/tourist-statistic.htm>

- Malaysia
 - My Tourism Data (Government Agency), http://mytourismdata.tourism.gov.my/?page_id=860

- Singapore
 - Singapore Tourism Board (Government Agency), <https://www.stb.gov.sg/content/stb/en/statistics-and-market-insights/tourism-statistics/quarterly-tourism-performance-report.html>

- Thailand
 - National Statistical Office (Thailand), "International Tourist Arrival to Thailand by Nationality: 2010–2019", <http://statbbi.nso.go.th/staticreport/page/sector/th/17.aspx>

- Vietnam
 - Vietnam National Administration of Tourism
 - 2014: International visitors to Viet Nam in December and 12 months of 2014; <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/english/index.php/items/8149>
 - 2015: International visitors to Viet Nam in December and 12 months of 2015; <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/english/index.php/items/9968>
 - 2016: International visitors to Viet Nam in December and 12 months of 2016; <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/english/index.php/items/11311>
 - 2017: International visitors to Viet Nam in December and 12 months of 2017; <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/english/index.php/items/12453>
 - 2018: International visitors to Viet Nam in December and 12 months of 2018; <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/english/index.php/items/13551>
 - 2019: International visitors to Viet Nam in December and 12 months of 2019; <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/english/index.php/statistic/international?txtkey=&year=2019&period=t12>

Contributors

CAMBODIA



Dr. Daniel Schmücking was born in 1982 in Germany. He studied Political Science and Sociology at the Friedrich-Schiller University in Jena (Germany) and the Palacky University in Olomouc (Czech Republic). His professional and scientific focus has since been on political communication and election campaigns. He worked as a campaigner for the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and spent time at the University of Maryland (USA) and the University of California (USA) in the course of his doctoral studies. He taught at universities in Jena (Germany), Erfurt (Germany) and Budapest (Hungary). From 2015–2017, he headed the KAS office in Mongolia. Since the beginning of 2018 he has been Country Director of KAS in Cambodia. In early 2021 he completed a special mission as Campaign Manager of the CDU for the elections in the free state of Thuringia.



Chhay Lim is currently Program Manager in charge of foreign affairs projects at the KAS Office in Cambodia and a Research Fellow for EU-ASEAN Think-Tank Dialogue funded by the EU Commission. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in International Studies with an Honour-and-Distinction-thesis award from the Royal University of Phnom Penh in 2020. His thesis project centred on US-China strategic competition and Cambodia's foreign policy. Chhay was an assistant and interpreter for the spokesperson of the Royal Government and later worked with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). He was appointed by Peking University as a Representative of the ASEAN Delegation to the China-ASEAN Youth Summit 2021.

CHINA



Dr. Tingjian Cai has studied Political Science and German Philology in Beijing and Göttingen. After completing his dissertation on "Secularization and the Return of Religion in China", he received a doctoral degree from Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU). He then continued to work at the LMU München as a postdoctoral researcher, focusing on Chinese political thought, political system and Sino-German relations. Since 2020, he has been working at the KAS Office in Beijing as a Programme Manager and Research Assistant. He focuses on research topics such as Sino-European and Sino-German relations and internal political shifts in China, and maintains communication with Chinese research institutions, think tanks, and university scholars.

GERMANY



Christian Echle is the Head of the Asia/Pacific Department of KAS since March 2022. He was previously the Director of the foundation's Political Dialogue Asia programme, based in Singapore, from June 2017 to February 2022. His first posting abroad was in Johannesburg, where he was responsible for KAS Media Africa, the regional programme in support of media freedom in Sub-Saharan Africa. Christian studied German Literature, History and Sociology in Freiburg, Gothenborg, and Munich. During this time, he was awarded with a scholarship for promising young journalists by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. His journalistic work includes articles and pieces for *Badische Neueste Nachrichten*, *Badische Zeitung*, and the German public broadcasters. He joined the foundation in 2007 as an Online Editor. His work focusses on the influence of Social Media on social and political opinion making, the digital transformation, and the co-operation with political parties.



David Merkle is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Advanced Research Center for Humanities and Social Sciences at National Chung Hsing University in Taiwan. At KAS, David works as Desk Officer in the Asia/Pacific Department in Berlin. Prior to that he worked for the Bank of China in Frankfurt am Main and in the Shanghai Office of KAS. David graduated in East Asian Studies from the University of Bochum (B.A.) and the

University of Tübingen (M.A.) with a focus on Taiwan, Cross-Strait Relations, and cultural diplomacy.



Isabel Marie Weininger started working in KAS's European and International Cooperation division in 2017. Since January 2020 she has been Policy Advisor for Southeast Asia (KAS offices in Indonesia/East Timor, Cambodia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam) in the Asia/Pacific Department. Her other positions within the foundation have included Deputy Head at KAS Ukraine (2017–2019 in Kyiv), Country Representative in Cambodia (2021 in Phnom Penh) and Interim Director of the Asia/Pacific Department in Berlin (early 2022). Before KAS she worked for the Munich Security Conference. Isabel studied Political Science, International Law and International Relations in Munich, Paris, and Dresden. Her expertise lies in the fields of European and security policy. Furthermore, she is involved in promoting women in foreign and security policy at WIIS.de.

MALAYSIA



Dr. Ngeow Chow-Bing is Director of the Institute of China Studies at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. He received his PhD in Public and International Affairs from Northeastern University, Boston, United States. Chow-Bing's research interests include China's political development and China-Southeast Asia relations. He has published articles in a number of peer-reviewed journals including *The China Review*, *Ocean Development and International Law*, *China Report*, *Asian Politics and Policy*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *East Asia: An International Quarterly*, *China: An International Journal*, *Issues and Studies*, and *Problems of Post-Communism*. He is editor of *Researching China in Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2019) and co-editor of *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Springer, 2022).



Miriam Fischer has been the Director of the KAS Office in Malaysia since August 2020. She has been working with KAS in Germany and abroad for more than ten years. Her postings have included the Multinational Development Dialogue of KAS in Brussels, Belgium; KAS Philippines, and the Sub-Saharan Africa division of KAS Headquarters in

Berlin, Germany. She holds B.A. and M.A. degrees in European Studies from the universities of Bremen & Göttingen (Germany) and Uppsala (Sweden).



Jessie Kah Yan Lee holds a B.A. in International Relations from the European School of Political and Social Sciences (ESPOL) in Lille, France. She is a member of the student think tank GROW (Generation for the Rights Over the World), which focuses on human rights, and of the association MASAF (Malaysian Students Association in France). She is expecting to graduate this year and is keen to learn more about post-colonial studies in International Relations. Jessie Kah was Dr. Ngeow's assistant for this study.

SINGAPORE



Jan Kliem joined KAS's Political Dialogue Asia programme, based in Singapore, in 2021. He is responsible for the office's security and geopolitics portfolio, a position that aligns with his prior work experience and research interests in international relations, regional integration, and security and geopolitics. Jan was previously Senior Programme Officer at the German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance (CPG) in Bangkok, and has worked with the Government of Western Australia as well as the European Union. He has lived in Asia since 2010, and holds a B.A. in Political Science from Germany and an M.A. in International and Asian Studies from the City University of Hong Kong.

THAILAND



Dr. Céline-Agathe Caro is the Director of the KAS Office in Thailand. Before serving in Asia, she was a Senior Policy Analyst at KAS Washington (2016–2018), the Coordinator for European Policy in the headquarters of the foundation in Berlin (2010–2015), and a Research Fellow in its Paris office (2007–2010). Prior to that she was an Assistant Professor and a Lecturer at the University of Dresden, Germany (2002–2007). Her research focuses on current issues regarding the future of the European integration and Germany's EU policy, US transatlantic policy and US positions

on key international issues as well as the perception of the EU and current international developments in Southeast Asia. Since 2010 Céline is a frequent participant in seminars and panel discussions at think tanks, governmental institutions, and universities. She received her PhD in German and French Studies from the university Sorbonne-Nouvelle in Paris and the TU Dresden.



Sasiwan Chingchit worked for KAS Thailand in 2021 as a Research and Analysis Manager. Before that, she was an independent Development and Research Consultant, working with non-governmental and non-profit organisations including the World Bank (2019), The Asia Foundation (2019–20) – where she previously served as Program Officer from 2014 to 2018 – and the Food and Agriculture Organization, Myanmar (2020). Before joining the Asia Foundation, she was a Visiting International Fellow at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses in India (2013–14) and a non-resident WSD-Handa Fellow at Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies, in Hawaii (2012–16). Earlier in her career, she was a Lecturer at the Faculty of Political Science, Prince of Songkla University in Thailand. Sasiwan holds an M.A. and MPhil in Political Science from Jawaharlal Nehru University, and a B.A. in International Relations from Chulalongkorn University.



Erwann Enguerrand Elsenmüller studies Political Science at the TUM School of Governance of the Technical University of Munich, Germany. He is also Co-Chair of the Bundesverband für Sicherheitspolitik an Hochschulen (BSH) Munich. In Spring 2022, he interned at KAS Thailand and helped in rechecking all data collected for this study.

VIETNAM



Dr. Pham Sy Thanh earned his PhD in Economics from Institute of Economics, Nankai University, Tianjin, China. He was the Asian Development Bank's National Consultant on China's Belt and Road Initiative Research Program from June 2018 to June 2019, and was later appointed the Director of Mekong – China Strategic Studies Program (MCSS) under Vietnam National University of Agriculture in June 2020. His research focuses on Economic Growth Theory and Chinese Economic Growth

(since 1949), China-ASEAN Economic Relations, Chinese State-Owned Enterprises Reform (since 1978), Chinese Macroeconomy, China's Belt and Road Initiative, Lancang–Mekong Cooperation, etc. He participated in the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) entitled "Regional Project: US Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific – Joint Project for East Asia Pacific and South and Central Asian Regions" that was organised by the US Department of State in 2020.



Florian Constantin Feyerabend has been Resident Representative of KAS Vietnam since August 2021, having worked for the foundation in Germany and abroad since 2014. After a two-year posting to Georgia, where he worked for the foundation in the regional programme Political Dialogue South Caucasus and temporarily headed it, he moved to Berlin in May 2016 to join KAS's Europe/North America Department. Until April 2021, he was responsible for the Western Balkans and Southeast Europe. Florian studied Political and Administrative Sciences as well as International Relations in Konstanz, Sheffield, and Bangkok. During his studies he gained his first practical work experience in Southeast Asia, e.g. at the German Embassy in Bangkok and at Siemens.



Pham Thi To Hang has been Programme Manager at KAS Vietnam since 2015. She is in charge of projects related to representation and participation, social market economy, and foreign and security policies. Before joining KAS, she worked for 14 years in the media industry and obtained a M.A. in Public Policy and Management in the UK.

