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Connecting & Distancing

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Connecting & Distancing

Southeast Asia and China

EDITED BY HO KHAI LEONG



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CONTRIBUTORS

CHAN Yuk Wah is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Asian and International Studies of the City University of Hong Kong. She obtained her Ph.D. from the Department of Anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, with a fieldwork-based thesis on borderland trade and tourism in Vietnam. Her research interests include: Regional studies: South China and Vietnam; Diaspora and migration studies: Chinese and Vietnamese diaspora; Tourism studies: outbound Chinese tourists.

E-mail: yukchan@cityu.edu.hk

Edgardo E. DAGDAG is Professor, Asian Center, University of the Philippines. His research areas are Philippine foreign relations (including Philippine-China relations), China-Taiwan-ASEAN relations, and security concerns in East Asia.

E-mail: edgardo.dagdag@up.edu.ph

Aimee DAWIS teaches at the Graduate Programme of the University of Indonesia's Department of Communication, School of Social and Political Sciences and the Letters Department, School of Humanities. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication Studies from Loyola Marymount University at Los Angeles, California before pursuing her Master's of Professional degree in Communications from Cornell University at Ithaca, New York. She earned her doctorate in Media Ecology from New York University's Department of Communication in 2005. She has written and presented on Cultural Studies, Research Methods and Methodology, Ethnography, Postmodernism, and Media and Identity. Her book, based on her Ph.D. dissertation, *The Chinese of Indonesia and Their Search for Identity:*

The Relationship between Collective Memory and the Media, has been published by Cambria Press, New York, 2009.

E-mail: canting@hotmail.com

GOH Geok Yian obtained her Doctor of Philosophy in History from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa in August 2007. Born in Singapore, she majored in Southeast Asian Studies and Sociology while she was an undergraduate at the National University of Singapore (1991–95). She worked in the publishing industry for more than 5 years before undertaking postgraduate study. She has interests in the continuities between the ancient and the modern period, with special concentration on Myanmar. Geok is currently working on an English translation of a Myanmar novel by Ma Sandar, a popular novelist of the 1990s, and preparing her dissertation for publication.

E-mail: geok@hawaii.edu

Mike Shi-chi LAN is Assistant Professor and Director of Master of Arts in Contemporary China (MACC) programme, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He received his Ph.D. in History from the University of Chicago in 2004. Dr Lan has written on modern Chinese history — particularly Chinese nationalism and China-Taiwan relations, history and international relations of modern East Asia, and the production of national identities, historical knowledge, and memory in China, Taiwan, and Singapore. His recent works include “U.S. Foreign Policy and the Changing Dynamics between China and Taiwan, 1995–2005”, in *Ensuring Interests: the Dynamics of China-Taiwan Relations and Southeast Asia*, edited by Ho Kock Chung and Ho Khai Leong (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya, 2006), and “Whose War Is Commemorated? History and Memory of the Second World War in Postwar Singapore” (translated into Japanese), in *15th August in Asia*, edited by Kawashima Shin et al. (Tokyo: Yamakawa Publishing Co., forthcoming).

E-mail: SCLan@ntu.edu.sg

Jason LIM graduated with First Class Honours in Asian Studies from Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia, in 1995. He obtained his Ph.D. from the University of Western Australia in 2007. He has conducted research work in Singapore, Australia, the United Kingdom, China and Taiwan on the Fujian-Singapore tea trade and the political and trading concerns of the Singapore Chinese tea merchants from 1920 to 1960.

E-mail: jasonlim71@yahoo.com

Chin-Ming LIN is currently Assistant Professor and Director of the Graduate Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Tamkang University in Taiwan. He received his Ph.D. in economics from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He was a researcher at the Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica and the APEC Study Center, Taiwan Institute of Economic Research. His main fields of research include economic development, international political economy and feminist economics. His recent research works include services trade statistics, remittances of migrant women workers, and East Asian regional integration.

E-mail: 113922@mail.tku.edu.tw

NG Beoy Kui is Assistant Chair/Associate Professor of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Prior to joining academia, he was attached to the Economics Department of Bank Negara Malaysia and the South East Asian Central Banks (SEACEN) Research and Training Centre. His research interest includes macroeconomic management and economic reforms in Southeast Asia and China, international finance and monetary management. He has published research papers on foreign exchange markets, capital markets, ethnic Chinese business as well as financial reforms in Southeast Asia and China.

E-mail: ABKNG@ntu.edu.sg

SHINOZAKI Kaori obtained her Ph.D. at the Department of Area Studies, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, University of Tokyo in 2007. She is currently Researcher/Advisor, Japan Information Service, Embassy of Japan in Malaysia. She is working on ethnicity and Chinese in Southeast Asia, especially the formation of networks of Chinese communities in the nineteenth and twentieth century, spreading from Penang to cover the northern part of the Malacca Straits and how they established relations with local authorities and other components of the society to participate in construction of social order.

E-mail: shinozaki.kaori@nifty.com

WU Xiao An (Ph.D.) is Professor of History and Director of the Centre for the Study of Chinese Overseas, Peking University. His publications include *Chinese Business in the Making of a Malay State, 1882–1941*.

E-mail: wu2@pku.edu.cn

YOW Cheun Hoe is Assistant Professor in the Division of Chinese, Nanyang Technological University. His academic interests cover Chinese diaspora,

qiaoxiang areas as well as Chinese education and literature in Southeast Asia. His publications include articles in *Modern Asian Studies* and in volumes such as *Demarcating Ethnicity in New Nations: Cases of the Chinese in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia* (edited by Lee Guan Kin), *Nantah tuxiang: lishi heliu zhong de shengshi* [Nantah Images: Looking from Historical Perspective] (edited by Lee Guan Kin), *Ensuring Interests: Dynamics of China-Taiwan Relations* (edited by Ho Khai Leong and Hou Kok Chung), *Chinese Transnational Networks* (edited by Tan Chee Beng), and *Beyond Chinatown: New Chinese Migration: New Chinese Migration and the Global Expansion of China* (edited by Mette Thuno).

E-mail: CHYow@ntu.edu.sg

Editor

HO Khai Leong (Ph.D. Ohio State, 1988) is Associate Professor, School of Humanities and Social Science, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, and an associate research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. His current research interests include Malaysian and Singaporean politics, China-ASEAN relations, corporate governance and administrative reforms. The latest works he has edited are *Reforming Corporate Governance in Southeast Asia: Economics, Politics and Regulations* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), *Rethinking Administrative Reforms in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2006), *Ensuring Interests: Dynamics of China-Taiwan Relations and Southeast Asia* (Co-editor) (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of China Studies, 2006), and *ASEAN-Korea Relations: Security, Trade, and Community Building* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006).

E-mail: klho@ntu.edu.sg

INTRODUCTION

Ho Khai Leong

“Connecting” and “distancing” have been two prominent themes permeating the writings on the historical and contemporary developments of the relationship between Southeast Asia and China. As neighbours, the nation-states in Southeast Asia and the giant political entity in the north communicated with each other through a variety of diplomatic overtures, political agitations, and cultural nuances. The people felt a need to connect even in the worst of times when governments were not on the best of terms. “Connecting” is a two-way street. It denotes a deep influence of Chinese presence in the region since the sixteenth century in the areas of trade, culture and politics, as well as Southeast Asia’s enduring bewilderment and perplexity about its giant neighbour. The rise of China and the recent influx of Chinese immigrants in the region added to the already influential and considerable presence of China. In the last two decades with the rise of China as an economic powerhouse in the region, Southeast Asia’s need to connect with China has become more urgent and necessary as it attempts to reap the benefit from the successful economic modernization in China.

At the same time, however, there were feelings of ambivalence, hesitation and even suspicions on the part of the Southeast Asian states vis-à-vis the rise of a political power which is so little understood or misunderstood. Much of these negative thoughts admittedly were remnants of historical experiences; some are possibly even related to the growing soft and hard power influence of the People’s Republic of China. “Distancing”, therefore, refers to the attitudes and policies of these nations’ attempts to maintain their sovereign rights as

well as political and cultural autonomy in the midst of a rising empire and regional hegemonic power.

To a large extent, the perpetual tensions between idealist expectation and realist necessity have defined Sino-Southeast Asia relations in the last few decades. How Southeast Asia and China should best deal with one another becomes a central question in this complex relationship. Martin Stuart Fox, for example, argues that in deciding how best to deal with China, two factors influencing the countries of Southeast Asia are their own long-standing histories of bilateral relations with China and their own differing conceptions of how foreign relations should be conducted.¹ In other words, a careful appreciation and thoughtful consideration of history and culture are central to any understanding of the likely future shape of China-Southeast Asia relations. An over-simplistic categorization of assigning China to the category of a benign power or that of a rising threat is problematic at best. It is the deeper social memories with which we have to contend; and in so doing, arrive at an understanding as to how China perceives its position in history with respect to the world.

The papers in this volume were presented at a conference organized by the Singapore Society for Asian Studies, in Singapore, on 1 December 2007, with an emphasis on the bilateral relations between Southeast Asia and China. The contributors are authors of various disciplinary backgrounds: history, political science, economics and sociology. They provide a spectrum of perspectives by which the reader can view Sino-Southeast Asia relations.

Wu Xiao An's chapter provides an excellent historical overview of Sino-Southeast Asia relations. He suggests that the tough, complex and multi-faceted historical relationship has been largely shaped by both geo-political dynamics and the internal political forces of individual countries. While the components and the nature of these forces might have presently changed, their impact on the relationship remained very much intact. Undoubtedly inter-state relationships are bound by political circumstances, but the non-governmental interactions in the future will perhaps take central stage as there is now much more room for these actors to manoeuvre. Wu concludes that the social and cultural exchanges at the people-to-people level should be refocused as this may be one area which will be much more meaningful in fostering the China-Southeast Asian rapprochement.

Edgardo Dagdag echoes these arguments in his assessment of Philippine-China connections from the pre-colonial period to post-Cold War era. He is of the view that despite the often tempestuous relations between the two countries, Sino-Philippine relations will continue to prosper in the future. But this is only if they simultaneously rely on both bilateral and multilateral

agreements between ASEAN and China. The Philippines cannot hope to connect well with China alone. As a member of ASEAN, the Philippines may pin its hopes on better bilateral ties with China through the concerted efforts of the ten-member organization. Future challenges to the relationship would include the Philippines' close ties with the United States of which the Chinese certainly do not approve.

Mike Lan Shi-chi's paper takes on the issue of memory and commemoration of Singapore's Chinese community towards China at the turn of the twentieth century. His study focuses on the ethnic Chinese in the island-state as they played a major role in shaping the present cultural configuration in the nation-building process. After the British withdrawal in 1942, the ethnic Chinese suffered much hardship under Japanese rule, and many joined the underground forces to fight against the Japanese invaders — in both Singapore and China; their loyalty to the land however was suspected by both the colonial masters and local rulers. Lan argued that these suspicions were unwarranted, as the ethnic Chinese had at that historical point transferred their nationalist loyalty in various ways from China to the new nation.

Kaori Shinozaki's paper is a case study of Penang's Chinese during the period 1911–13 and the community's response in terms of their “revolutionary” and “patriotic” donation campaigns. She argues that the financial support by Penang's Chinese community for the Sun Yat-sen led revolutionary movement in China had grown out of a concern for stability, order and good governance, rather than support for the revolutionary cause of overthrowing the corrupt Ching dynasty. Studying these self-motivating donation campaigns, she saw the nascent emergence of a civil society in colonial Malaya at the beginning of the century.

The commercial connections between the overseas Chinese community and mainland China also grew rapidly after the Republican revolution. Jason Lim gives a detailed study on the Fujian tea merchants in Singapore who imported goods from China and re-exported to local clientele or elsewhere, and then consequently established themselves with branches of their family businesses in Southeast Asia. Lim argued that the sense of patriotism towards China among these wealthy tea merchants was evident in their fervent response to Japanese imperialism as well as their passionate commitment to rebuild a war-torn China. Their attachment to “China” as the motherland, however, quickly dissipated with the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 as the political loyalty of these merchants mostly rested with the KMT. Subsequently, the dedication and devotion of the second generations of these merchants were transformed very quickly, establishing their cultural and political identities as Singaporeans.

Goh Geok Yian's chapter examines China-Myanmar relations by looking at Burmese sources, a path less taken by scholars in the field, as most tend to view the relationship from the Chinese perspective or from Chinese sources. Her study shows descriptions of Burmese perceptions of their relations with Tarup (China) extracted from indigenous sources which represent invaluable reflections of local views of their foreign neighbour. A more balanced observation of Myanmar-China relations over a period of several centuries from Tagaung (mid-first millennium CE) to Hanthawati-Taungngu of the sixteenth century is presented, and the reader will find the account both refreshing and informative.

Yow Cheun Hoe's paper is a piece of pioneering work on the study of a recent social and migratory phenomenon in Singapore: the influx of a steady and large group of students from the PRC to the island-state. With the arrival of this group of "foreign talents", many issues have since emerged: their adaptation to the local social environment, impact on Singaporean Chinese culture and educational system, and local perceptions of this group. Yow's paper examines these questions pertaining to Chinese students in Singapore, with special focus on the secondary education sector. In examining their migration trajectory, he found that students from China pursuing secondary education in the island-state have the highest tendency to move on to other countries for further studies, making Singapore the "jumping board" of their future life goals. Obviously these findings will have major policy implications.

Aimee Dawis tackles the perennial and difficult issue of cultural identity of the Chinese in Indonesia during the Suharto era (1966–98). Her analysis is based on a study of how the Indonesian Chinese used imported media from Hong Kong, Taiwan and China — places that are simultaneously real and imagined to the Indonesian Chinese — to inform their cultural identity formation and maintenance. Her findings suggest that to the list of agents shaping Chinese identity in Indonesia, one must add the roles of the media and local ethnic organizations.

Beside historical memories, the transforming cultural identities and commercial ties forming the connections between Southeast Asia and China, contemporary economic relations is certainly another major issue. Ng Beoy Kui's paper details the policy responses of individual Southeast Asian countries towards a rising China. Ng contends that, while it is difficult to ascertain whether China poses a threat to the Southeast Asian countries, the complementary economic Sino-Southeast Asia relationship would inevitably benefit Southeast Asia more than China. For the relationship to prosper in the future, Ng suggests that Southeast Asian countries should take a two-track

approach, i.e. the first track through the usual export-oriented strategy in manufacturing spearheaded by multinational corporations (MNCs), and the second track augmenting the first by providing additional support to local enterprises dependent on indigenous skills and resources.

Lin Chin-Ming's paper deals with the impact of Asian regionalism on the region as a whole, particularly from Taiwan's perspective. How do countries respond to the changing notions of regionalism — what the author called “old” and “new” regionalism? Looking at China-Taiwan trade relations and patterns of Japanese export and output growth in the pre-Plaza Accord period, Lin argues that “old” regionalism dies hard, and sometimes reappears, intermingled with the “new” regionalism.

Chan Yuk Wah's paper is a study of Vietnam-China relations, focusing on the Vietnamese adeptness in diplomatically pacifying the ambition of its giant neighbour so as to maintain a relatively peaceful and harmonious relationship through “language power” — which comprises both relational rhetoric and historical taciturnity and which the author defines as the language of “routinized intimacy and friendship rhetoric painstakingly displayed by state actors as well as lay people”. This tactful approach has enabled Vietnam-China relations to remain stable and secure despite the stress and fault lines in the relationship.

All in all, the volume suggests that history, culture and social memories are some of the main factors influencing Southeast Asian relations with China. Current Southeast Asia relations with a rising China are affected by the Southeast Asian countries' long histories of bilateral relations with China as well as their own differing perceptions as to how bilateral relations have been conducted. At the same time, however, one cannot ignore the fact that commerce and trade, both historical and contemporary, also play an important role in determining their relations. The current pursuit for concluding foreign trade agreements between Southeast Asian states individually and ASEAN as a whole with China is but one indication of the significance of this trade relation.

It is therefore clear that a combination of history, culture and trade affect Southeast Asia's relations with China. The decision to connect or to distance one nation from another has created a type of tension that is both healthy and beneficial. Chinese influence in the region rests on a number of factors: China's restraint in requesting adjustments in Southeast Asian policies to suit her political, economic and strategic interests, her contributions to the political stability of Southeast Asian regimes, and her commitments to continue favourable trade practices. On the other hand, Southeast Asia's anticipation

of additional benefits derived from closer relations with China in the future will be contingent upon the pace of economic and political modernization of an ever-changing China.

Note

1. Martin Stuart-Fox, "Southeast Asia and China: The Role of History and Culture in Shaping Future Relations", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 26, no. 1 (2004): 116–39.