

***In the Dragon's Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century.*  
By Sebastian Strangio. New Haven and London: Yale University  
Press, 2020. Hardcover: 337pp.**

Sebastian Strangio's *In the Dragon's Shadow* is a very ambitious book but one that meets the challenge with carefully weighted judgement, insight and panache. It tackles China's interests and influence in each Southeast Asian country, the responses of regional states and where Southeast Asia as a region and the individual ASEAN member states fit within the growing US-China rivalry—and all within 300 pages. A pleasure to read, the book benefits from the author's journalistic background in the region, especially with its clear and engaging language and the use of both historical and current vignettes as well as interviews to support and enliven its abstract arguments.

The book opens with a very recent vignette of the arrival of a cruise ship carrying thousands of Chinese tourists at the former massive US naval base at Subic Bay in the Philippines—a colourful and vivid exemplar of the shift of geostrategic influence in Southeast Asia from the United States to China during the post-Cold War era. Beijing's shadow over the region looms larger, whereas America's lights are dimming.

Temporally, with an eye firmly on the present and foreseeable future, the book reaches back to trace the centuries of interaction between Southeast Asia and China, the region's largest and most important neighbour. It describes a continual and ongoing process of engagement and mutual (if asymmetric) adjustment, starting from the first trading relations between Chinese civilization and Southeast Asia during the voyages of Admiral Zheng He to Maoist China's attempts to export revolution to the region in the twentieth century, as well as Southeast Asia's increasing economic interdependence with post-Deng China.

The book includes a 12-page Afterword addressing the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic that spread from China to Southeast Asia and the wider world in 2020. This last-minute addition, which also serves as the book's conclusion, does not jar with the earlier, more-considered main text, but rather amplifies it. Time will tell if Strangio's prediction will hold true that “when the pandemic finally petered out, Southeast Asia's relationship with China was unlikely to have been altered in any fundamental way” (p. 273). With the pandemic still far from contained in Indonesia and the Philippines, early signs suggest that he is correct.

As suggested by the title, the book is primarily about Southeast Asian responses to China's interests and actions in the region. China is the protagonist of this story, to which Southeast Asia does most of the adjusting. The book divides its two main sections between the countries of mainland and maritime Southeast Asia respectively. The discussion of the former is framed in terms of China's control of the Mekong River, while the latter by China's unlawful claims in the South China Sea. Both sections begin with a focus on Chinese interests in the two subregions before discussing the responses of the regional countries to those interests.

Conceptually, the book persuasively presents a unity underlying the regional responses to China's proximity and size, despite the diversity of the region's manifold societies. It effectively simplifies and provides an overarching conceptual coherence to interactions between China and Southeast Asia without being simplistic.

For Strangio, each Southeast Asian state and society is captured in a permanently dialectical relationship with China. On the one hand, China's huge size, civilizational claims and expansive interests mean that each of its maritime and continental neighbours is inevitably fearful of a strong—or a chaotic—China. On the other hand, China's economic and cultural gravitational pull is irresistible, offering many opportunities to Southeast Asian states. If the Southeast Asian civilizations of yore acknowledged Chinese centrality through tributary missions centuries ago, their modern counterparts do so by signing up to Chinese initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) today.

The book works best as an introduction to the historical and current interactions between China and each Southeast Asian state (minus Brunei and Timor-Leste for reasons of space) and how these have been shaped by their own respective interactions with the other major powers. The rising rivalry between the United States and China, and its impacts on Southeast Asia, is addressed well. Southeast Asian states do not and will not align themselves with the United States to directly confront China. Likewise, the author convincingly shows the limits of Chinese soft power and attraction in each of the ASEAN member states.

Being most familiar with the Philippines, it is the chapter on that country where this reviewer disagrees with some of the details while still agreeing with its overall argument. Undoubtedly, other Southeast Asian country experts may find similar eyebrow-raisers in the respective chapters focusing on the states they know best. For example, without providing supporting evidence, Strangio claims that

“Japan remained by far the largest source of foreign direct investment in the Philippines” (p. 258). Official Philippine statistics reveal that it is the United States that actually holds this position, both in terms of total stock and recent inflows, while Japan is a distant second. On the following page, in his discussion of China’s activities in the Philippine’s exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea, the author asserts that, “All of this changed with China’s assertion of its ‘nine-dash’ line claim in 2009 and its mammoth land reclamation activities in the Spratly Islands. Suddenly the wide sea shrank to a narrow strait” (p. 259). The author identifies this moment as the pivotal juncture when China’s shadow started to loom darkly over the Philippines. Yet, the takeover of Mischief Reef (an atoll located within the Philippines’ continental shelf) by China in 1995 is a better candidate to mark the emergence of China’s shadow.

*In the Dragon’s Shadow* provides a very useful grand sweep of Southeast Asia-China relations whose breadth does not sacrifice its depth and nuance. The book is accessible to a wide audience and worth more than one reading. Hopefully, a second edition or sequel awaits in the not-too-distant future.

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