

***China's Footprints in Southeast Asia*. Edited by Maria Serena I. Diokno, Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao and Alan H. Yang. Singapore: NUS Press, 2019. Softcover: 249pp.**

China's Footprints in Southeast Asia is an edited volume which tries to assess the effectiveness and impact of China's soft power in Southeast Asia. In doing so, the contributors employ Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power" and develop the notion of China's "footprint" in the region, defined by the editors as "the tangible presence, mark or effect of China's exercise of soft power" (p. 16). The book also attempts to address the politics of Southeast Asian countries' dependency on China. The edited volume suggests that China's soft power is imbued with "invasive" characteristics, which in turn produces a "disruptive rather than benign effect" on regional states (p. 16).

The introductory chapter by the three editors, Maria Serena I. Diokno, Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao and Alan H. Yang, begins by explaining some of the major constraints in China's relations with Southeast Asia, and how Beijing has tried to overcome them. These constraints include the historical context of China's influence on the overseas Chinese residing in Southeast Asia, the rapid modernization of the country's armed forces, its growing economic profile in the region and the South China Sea dispute. From China's perspective, many elements of the existing regional order do not align with its interests, which has prompted Beijing to try to transform some of the underpinnings of the current regional strategic landscape. Soft power is one tool China has used to transform its ties with Southeast Asia. Hence, the second chapter of this volume, written by Teng-Chi Chang, provides the concept of "footprint" to measure the economic and cultural aspects of China's presence in the region, and how these aspects impact regional geopolitics.

While both the introductory and second chapter outline the theoretical framework, the authors could have discussed in greater detail the motivations behind China's efforts to increase its soft power in Southeast Asia. This includes explaining what China aims to achieve and the means by which it wields soft power, identifying the targets of these efforts (elites or the mass public?) and considering how countries in the region perceive China's soft power attributes.

Chapters Three to Six—by Ian Tsung-yen Chen, Ngeow Chow Bing, Natalia Soebagio and Dennis D. Trinidad respectively—provide a weighty discussion of China’s economic statecraft tools in Southeast Asia. These tools include trade, foreign direct investment and developmental aid. This raises two questions. Firstly, should economic statecraft be considered as soft power? Since soft power is generally understood as the ability to achieve strategic goals through attraction rather than payment or coercion, the authors could have explained why economic statecraft should be included as soft power tool. Secondly, even if economic statecraft can be considered as a form of soft power, it can also be used as a hard power tool to achieve strategic ends. A discussion about how economic statecraft tools can become “hard” through the weaponization of trade, curtailing investments or postponing foreign aid is absent.

China’s cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool in the region is the subject of the next two chapters. Chapter Seven, by Yumi Kitamura, reflects on Confucianism in Indonesia, but eventually digresses by focusing on the domestic politics of Southeast Asia’s largest country and how the Indonesian Chinese have taken advantage of China’s rise for their own political purposes. Chapter Eight, by Hsiao and Yang, examines the Confucius Institute and Confucius Classroom to demonstrate how China is expanding its efforts to widen its soft power influence. Given their competition for influence in Southeast Asia, a comparative study of China’s and Taiwan’s soft power efforts in the region would have been interesting.

The book has some shortcomings. On page 8, the editors state that China aspires to connect its two Southwestern cities of “Guangzhou (Guangxi) and Kunming (Yunnan)” with Southeast Asia. In fact it is Nanning—the capital city of Guangxi—that has been touting itself as the bridge connecting China and Southeast Asia (Guangzhou is in Guangdong Province). More substantively, the analysis of economic ties between China and Myanmar in Chapter Three, by Chen, only features data up to 2013 (p. 74), and should have been updated to reflect the current state of bilateral economic relations. For example, the chapter ranks China as the top investor in Myanmar. In fact, Singapore became Myanmar’s top investor in 2014. An update would be timely as the suspension of the Myitsone Dam in 2011 has since triggered substantial changes in China’s investment portfolio in Myanmar. Furthermore, in addition to the natural resources sector, Chinese investments in services such as tourism and vocational schools have been on the rise since 2013.

The main conclusion of the volume is that China will continue to expand its soft power footprint in the region despite the challenges. However, in the context of the claim that China's soft power has had a "disruptive rather than benign effect" on the region, it raises the question as to why Southeast Asian countries would have allowed such efforts to continue. The book should have recognized that Chinese soft power efforts—supported by its economic power—have taken off in the region not only because it is in China's interests to do so, but also because there is a demand for what China can offer. For example, China's leadership in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are attractive to Southeast Asian countries given their strong potential to improve connectivity and provide more economic opportunities. Moreover, the book would have served readers better if it had explained the factors that affect the levels of receptiveness to China's influence in Southeast Asian countries. This can be achieved by exploring how the host country's political and economic aspirations can shape its perception of China's soft power.

What the edited volume thus overlooks is that regional states are not passive recipients of China's influence. Countries in Southeast Asia are particularly cautious about China's rise and its implications for the regional order, especially given that China's activism in the region has intensified strategic competition with the United States, Japan and even India. If only the book had examined this critical issue, it would have provided greater depth to the topic of China's influence in Southeast Asia.

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