RISING CHINA'S
Soft Power in Southeast Asia

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Edited by

Leo Suryadinata

RISING CHINA'S

Soft Power in Southeast Asia

Impact on Education and Popular Culture

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The Contributors

Aranya Siriphon is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University. Her research interests are in recent Chinese migrants and mobility in the Mekong region, and transnational migration studies.

Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia is a faculty member of the Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Indonesia. His research interests include China's foreign policy, China-Southeast Asia relations, and Indonesia-China people-to-people exchanges. His research has been published in the *International Journal of China Studies*, *Pacific Review*, *Asian Perspective* and *南洋问题研究*.

Chang-Yau Hoon is Professor of Anthropology at the Institute of Asian Studies, University of Brunei Darussalam. He is also Visiting Senior Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. He specializes in the Chinese diaspora, identity politics, multiculturalism, and religious and cultural diversity in contemporary Southeast Asia. His latest books include *Christianity and the Chinese in Indonesia: Ethnicity, Education and Enterprise* (Liverpool University Press, 2023); *Southeast Asia in China: Historical Entanglements and Contemporary Engagements* (authored with Y.K. Chan; Lexington Press, 2023); and *Stability, Growth and Sustainability: Catalysts for Socio-economic Development in Brunei Darussalam* (edited with A. Ananta and M. Hamdan; ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023).

Fan Pik Shy is a Senior Lecturer at the Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya. She received her PhD in Chinese Language and Applied Linguistics from Capital Normal University (Beijing, China). Her research interests are Chinese language, culture and literature, and education in China.

Gwendolyn Yap is a Research Officer with the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. Her research interests include popular culture, media, East Asian studies, Southeast Asian studies, literature and gender.

Hannah Ming Yit Ho is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Universiti Brunei Darussalam. She is also a National University of Singapore fellow (Southeast Asia) attached to its Asia Research Institute. Her publications include journal articles in *Kritika Kultura, Asiatic, Southeast Asian Review of English, Suvannabhumi* and *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies.* Her current research topics comprise Chinese language education in Brunei Darussalam and Chinese Bruneian literature in English, for which she has been awarded research grants. She co-edited *Engaging Modern Brunei: Research on Language, Literature and Culture* (Springer 2021).

Jane Yugioksing is former Director of the Chinese Studies Department at Ateneo de Manila University. She is a recipient of the Chinese Government Scholarship and is a current PhD candidate in International Relations at Jinan University. She is a member of the International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas and the Philippine Association for Chinese Studies. Her most recent published chapter is "A Perception-Based Study: Chinese Filipino's Response to China's COVID-19 Prevention Measures" in *Philippines-China Relations at 45 During the COVID-19 Pandemic: New Discoveries, Recent Developments, and Continuing Concerns* (2021). She is currently researching the mobility of Chinese Filipino students and the social identity of new Chinese migrants in the Philippines.

Josh Stenberg is a senior lecturer in Chinese studies at the University of Sydney. The author of *Minority Stages: Sino-Indonesian Performance and Public Display* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), his research interests include *xiqu* (Chinese opera) in modern and contemporary periods, the culture of Sino-Southeast Asian communities, and Chinese translation studies.

Leo Suryadinata is currently Visiting Senior Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. He was formerly Professor in the Department of Political Science at the National University of Singapore. He has published extensively on Southeast Asian politics, ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, and China-ASEAN relations. His latest book is *Rising China and New Chinese Migrants in Southeast Asia* (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022).

Lim Boon Hock obtained his PhD in Area Studies from Kyoto University, Japan, under the Monbukagaku-sho, a prestigious Japanese government scholarship. He conducted field research in Lao PDR and Cambodia for

a project entitled "Southeast Asian Personalities of Chinese Descent: A Biographical Dictionary". He was then the country editor-cum-writer in charge of these two countries. In 2019, he made a career switch to set up an NGO in Lao PDR to conduct basic English Language classes for the Laotian children. Currently, he is employed as a School Principal by Lao-Japan School, in Vientiane, Lao PDR.

Neo Peng Fu is a senior lecturer at the National Institute of Education (Singapore) and Director of the Confucius Institute at Nanyang Technological University. He is a historian by training who publishes mainly in two areas: Chinese classics and language-in-education policy (with special reference to Chinese language teaching and learning in Singapore). His detailed publication list can be accessed at https://www.nie.edu.sg/profile/neo-peng-fu

Ngeow Chow-Bing is Director of the Institute of China Studies at the University of Malaya. Dr Ngeow received his PhD in Public and International Affairs from Northeastern University. He is the editor of *Populism and Nationalism in the South China Sea Dispute* (co-edited with Peng Nian; Springer, 2022), *Researching China in Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2019) and *Southeast Asia and China: Exercises in Mutual Socialization* (co-edited with Lowell Dittmer; World Scientific, 2017). In addition, Dr Ngeow has written more than forty articles in scholarly journals and book chapters. He has also published short pieces in *South China Morning Post*, *ThinkChina*, *East Asia Forum* and *Channel NewsAsia*.

Shihlun Allen Chen is currently Associate Professor at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Sun Yat-Sen University. His research mainly focuses on the studies of Cambodia and Overseas Chinese, economic anthropology, identity theory, ethnic organizations, transnationalism, development theories, and Cross-straits issues.

Sivarin Lertpusit is an Assistant Professor at the College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Thammasat University, and a researcher in the socio-political field. She was formerly a visiting fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. She finished her doctoral degree in International Studies (Southeast Asian Studies) at the Graduate School of Asia Pacific Studies, Waseda University, Tokyo. Her studies focus on the Greater Mekong Subregion and the influence of China. Her previous works are *The Chinese*

Transborder and Its Socioeconomic Impact to Boten People (Laos), *Chinese Student Mobility*, and *New Chinese Migrants in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai*.

Tan Chee-Beng (PhD, Cornell University, 1979) taught at the University of Singapore, the University of Malaya, the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou. He is currently Adjunct Professor with CUHK. A cultural anthropologist, he has done research in Malaysia and China. His major publications include, as author, *The Baba of Melaka* (2021, new edition by SIRD), *Chinese Religion in Malaysia* (Brill, 2018), *Chinese Overseas: Comparative Cultural Issues* (Hong Kong University Press, 2004), and as editor, *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Overseas* (Routledge, 2013).

Tran Thi Xoan holds her MA in ASEAN Studies focusing on Chinese popular culture in Vietnam from Pridi Banomyong International College, Thammasat University, Thailand. She works as a foreign lecturer at Language Institute and Global Affairs, Chiang Rai Rajabhat University. She continues working on ASEAN Studies and Cross-Cultural Competence Embedded in the Teaching Curriculum, and English Language Analysis.

INTRODUCTION
An Overview of Rising Chinese Educational Soft Power and Cultural Influence in Southeast Asia

Leo Suryadinata

The recent rise of China and its impacts on the ethnic Chinese and non-Chinese in Southeast Asia have been one of the foci of the Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS) Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. In 2014, an international workshop was held at ISEAS on rising China, the arrival of *xin yimin* (new Chinese migrants) and the ethnic Chinese in Mainland Southeast Asia. In 2020, another workshop, focusing mainly on rising China and the *xin yimin* in Maritime Southeast Asia, was organized.

The papers of these two workshops were selected, revised and later published in a book under the title *Rising China and Chinese New Migrants in Southeast Asia* (2022). In October 2022, a third workshop on China's soft power in education, language and art with special emphasis on Chinese education was held. During the workshop, speakers did not present on Brunei Darussalam or China's popular arts in Southeast Asia—hence two more papers were added to this volume to provide a well-rounded survey. The revised papers have now been edited and transformed into a book, which you are holding now. It should be noted with thanks that these three workshops and the earlier publication of the two books were generously sponsored by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS).

Enquiry into China's Soft Power

It is widely recognized that China has risen economically. But with the rise of China as an economic power and regional military power, are China's soft

power and cultural influences also growing equally? Undoubtedly, China has been trying to promote its language, culture and education beyond its boundaries since its recent rise. American soft power has been influential in Southeast Asia and remains so today. South Korean soft power has also been rising, surpassing both Hong Kong/Taiwan and Japan in its strength. Is China's soft power, especially the Chinese language and its cultural products, becoming similarly popular and influential in the Southeast Asian region? This book aims to examine the above questions with special reference to the Chinese language and Chinese education, surveying not only the Chinese communities but also non-Chinese communities in Southeast Asia as well. The book is divided into four parts.

Part I: General Overview of China's Soft Power

The first part is the general overview of China's soft power, education and Confucius Institutes (CIs, 孔子学院). Tan Chee Beng's chapter (Ch 1) begins with a general overview of China's soft power in relation to Chinese overseas. The Chinese overseas are a potentially important resource for expanding China's soft power influence. His paper discusses China's major institutions involving Chinese overseas including the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, the China public associations, the China Council for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification, as well as similar associations established among Chinese overseas in Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.

Tan maintains that CIs and Chinese mass media play important roles in China's soft power policy, impacting the Chinese overseas. He notes that China is not sensitive to the feelings of both the ethnic Chinese and non-Chinese population of other countries which may affect the relations between China and many Southeast Asian states. As the rivalry between the US and China intensifies, Tan observes in his paper that "it is essential for China to build a good image among ordinary citizens of the countries where it invests, not just the ethnic Chinese. This can be accomplished by establishing centres and organizations that provide services that benefit them. The present policy of providing scholarships for higher education in China, for example, can be expanded."

In Chapter 2, Leo Suryadinata focuses on the role of the state and China's educational soft power in Southeast Asia. Initially Chinese schools were established by local Chinese communities without the involvement of the Chinese state and colonial state. Later on, China and Southeast Asian

states began to participate in shaping Chinese education in Southeast Asia to different degrees of success. Many Southeast Asian states succeeded in nationalizing Chinese schools into local schools, with the exception of those in Malaysia and Laos.

Rising China also began to introduce CIs to promote Chinese culture through language, and also offered scholarships to not only ethnic Chinese but also non-Chinese students. China also established university branches in some Southeast Asian countries (Laos and Malaysia). As such, Chinese educational soft power began to have an impact on Southeast Asians, not only among the ethnic Chinese communities but also among non-Chinese. The popularity of Mandarin has increased but is not comparable to the English language yet. As the Chinese language is an aspect of China's soft power, the growth of the Chinese language's popularity in Southeast Asia is often seen as an example of China's increasing soft power, albeit limited. Indeed, the US-China rivalry might impact the further growth of the Chinese language but it would not be able to stop the gradual spread of the Chinese language as it is essential when dealing with China.

Thereafter, Chapter 3 by Neo Peng Fu examines the role of CIs in dealing with the Chinese language outside China. It examines the current and future role of CIs in Maritime Southeast Asia, namely Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Through his paper, the question of expatriate teachers in meeting the needs of the local populace is addressed. Neo observes that CIs initially provided the necessary resources (teachers, textbooks and techniques of instruction) for helping various countries develop an infrastructure for teaching Mandarin. However, the continuous strong demand in Southeast Asia for mastering the Chinese language may result in the inability of CIs to meet these demands through expatriate teachers.

He therefore argues that CIs (or China) may have made "a right and wise move" on the issue, namely by helping the host countries to nurture their own crop of Chinese language teachers to make up for the lack of expatriate teachers from China. This reminds me of English teaching in Southeast Asia where countries used local rather than expatriate teachers. Only when countries are self-sufficient in teaching Chinese will Mandarin be able to compete with English.

Part II: China's Soft Power and Education in Mainland Southeast Asia

Chinese schools in Southeast Asia have a long history before the establishment of CIs. These Chinese schools were mainly catered to ethnic

Chinese children. With the rise of Thai nationalism, Chinese schools in Thailand were unwelcome and restricted. However, the situation gradually changed in the mid-1970s after Bangkok established diplomatic relations with Beijing and severed diplomatic ties with Taipei. Chapter 4 by Sivarin Lertpusit describes the educational cooperation between Thai and Chinese governments after the establishment of diplomatic ties, and evaluates the impact of Chinese education in Thailand, particularly among the China-educated Thais. Sivarin argues that Sino-Thai cooperation has expanded from government-to-government to the people-to-people level. Chinese-educated Thais are now key actors in promoting intercultural exchange between China and Thailand. Sivarin points out that China is renowned for its Science, Technology, Education and Mathematics (STEM) and e-commerce programmes in Thai vocational schools and universities. Moreover, the high educational reputation of the Chinese, employment opportunities and available scholarships attract a growing number of Thai students. Finally, Sivarin maintains that those Thai who were China-educated tend to promote China's image in Thailand. They deliver information and positive perspectives of China. Via Chinese education, Chinese soft power has had considerable achievement in Thailand.

However, Chapter 5 by Aranya Siriphon on Thailand conveys a rather different picture of Chinese education. Aranya conducted a case study on Chinese education in the Yunnanese Chinese community in northern Thailand. Unlike the Chinese who migrated and worked across Thailand, Yunnanese Chinese continue to reside in a specific area near the borders. Aranya addresses the responses of these ethnic Chinese towards educational soft power from China and Taiwan. While Beijing's educational policy appears to be more effective with "overseas Chinese" communities in Thailand, it was less successful with the Yunnanese Chinese due to their lingering loyalty to Taiwan. Prior to Bangkok's recognition of Beijing, Thailand had diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Therefore, the schools in northern Thailand are divided into pro-Taipei and pro-Beijing schools. In these Yunnanese Chinese communities, the number of students in pro-Taipei schools remains larger than that of pro-Beijing schools.

Nonetheless, due to the limitation of donations and educational support from Taiwan, pro-Beijing schools are increasing in number and may also become more dominant in the future with the growth of the economic, political and military power of mainland China. Yet, at the moment these two types of schools continue to coexist, reflecting slightly different cultural values. While the pro-Beijing schools are more secular in values, pro-Taipei schools are more Confucian. The comparison also shows the complexity

of Chinese education in Thailand and the impact of Chinese educational soft power.

China's educational power can also be seen in Laos. This is a result of China's rapid economic development and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in this landlocked country. Lim Boon Hock in Chapter 6 argues that the massive China's investment projects in Laos created strong demands for Laotians who are proficient in Mandarin. However, Laos has not had sufficient resources to sustain Chinese education and hence had to rely almost entirely on Beijing for not only teachers, but also curriculums and textbooks. Lim offers a case study of a major Chinese school, Liaodu (寮都) Public School, which suffers from these deficiencies. However, the standards of the Chinese language are still not up to expectations. To train more Chinese-speaking Laotians, China also established the Su Zhou University (苏州大学) branch in Laos where they are required to study for one year on the Laos campus and in China for the remaining years.

China's BRI has already created unprecedented and heightened interest in the learning of the Chinese language in local schools in Laos. There is a deeply rooted perception that acquiring a higher Chinese language proficiency promises upward social mobility opportunities, and hence, a brighter future, among young Laotians. The enthusiastic pursuit of Chinese education is often at the expense of Laotian identity. Not surprisingly, Lim argues that "the desirable outcomes of China's soft power in creating and sustaining a multifaceted 'win-win' relationship between China and Laos are yet to be seen."

Laos' neighbour, Cambodia, also has a close relationship with Beijing, with Beijing having massive investment projects in Cambodia. In Chapter 7 regarding Cambodian Chinese education, Shihlun Allen Chen examines the impact and influences of Chinese education since the early years of Cambodia, with a focus on the period after 1993. He argues that Cambodia has experienced three facets of Chinese education, namely ethnic Chinese education, foreign Chinese education and domestic Chinese education.

In the first facet, ethnic Chinese education sought foreign aid mainly from China and hence became China-oriented. However, this education, except for one secondary school, was limited to primary school levels. But after the rise of China and Beijing-Phnom Penh relations improved, Cambodian education entered the second facet, which was foreign education. This was characterized by the establishment of CIs in the country. CIs not only introduced the Chinese language at the primary level but also at the secondary level. Moreover, it offered Cambodian adults the opportunity to learn Mandarin. Even Chinese companies also offered

Mandarin courses for their employees. Chen finally argues that "[t]he final facet saw Cambodia building up their domestic Chinese education with the aid of Chinese universities. Chinese became part of the public school curriculum, alongside Khmer, English and French. However, even with the increase in scholarships to China, the number of students that head to China for higher learning remains low."

Chen did not explicitly discuss China's soft power and its impacts; however, it is obvious that China's educational soft power impacted Cambodians via Chinese education. Nonetheless, Chinese-educated Cambodian intellectuals remain small in number, just like the situation in many other Southeast Asian states.

Part III: China's Soft Power and Education in Maritime Southeast Asia

Malaysia, and at one time Singapore as well, had quite a complete Chinese educational system, ranging from primary school level to tertiary school level. However, the situation changed after Singapore gained independence in 1965. All Chinese schools in Singapore have been converted into national-type schools using English as the main language of instruction, Chinese is taught as a mother tongue (second language). Nanyang University merged with Singapore University in 1980 and formed the National University of Singapore (NUS). In Malaysia, primary and secondary Chinese schools remain. However, for Chinese tertiary education, Chinese Malaysians had to go to Taiwan, and later to Mainland China.

In recent years, more Malaysian Chinese are receiving education in Mainland China. In Chapter 8, Ngeow Chow Bing and Fan Pik Shy examine various groups of China-educated Malaysians, including both Chinese and non-Chinese. These China-educated are not only educated in China's tertiary education but also China's university branches in Malaysia. Courses were also conducted by CIs in Malaysia mainly for non-Chinese (i.e., the Malays). Many China-educated Malaysians later joined the organization known as *Liu Hua* (留华) in Malaysia which served as a platform "to connect its members, articulate and magnify their voices and interests, mobilize resources and liaise with other bodies and entities, including those from China".

Ngeow and Fan argued that from the perspective of China's soft power, all these categories of "China-educated Malaysians" generally (though not necessarily entirely) hold positive views about China. In their paper, they noted that "[t]hose who have been to China are, in general, impressed by

its rapid economic and technological development, the orderliness of its cities, and the dynamism of its people and society. However, some express concerns about the growing political restrictions within China and feel uncomfortable about this trend." However, Ngeow and Fan maintained that for those Malaysians who received Chinese education through Xiamen University (厦门大学) Malaysia branch or courses via CIs, China is perceived positively but at a superficial level. This is attributed to their limited exposure to China.

Ngeow and Fan also note that the "China-educated Malaysians" remain a minority group despite increasing numbers among the broader population of Malaysians receiving foreign education. They also observe that "there are currently no prominent political leaders, top civil servants, or think-tank analysts in Malaysia with a China education background". Nonetheless, as China's universities continue to attract students from Malaysia, China-trained or -educated important Malaysian leaders may emerge in Malaysian society over time.

Over in Indonesia, Chinese education experienced ups and downs. Chinese education was confined mainly to ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. During the Suharto New Order period (1966–98), Chinese education was banned. Nevertheless, after the fall of Suharto, "Chinese schools" re-emerged, but these Chinese schools are no longer Chinese-medium schools, but are national schools-plus. Simply put, it is an Indonesian school with the Chinese language as an extra subject. However, the post-Suharto period also witnesses the rise of CIs in Indonesia and its outreach to non-Chinese. China also offered scholarships to non-Chinese students to study at China's universities. Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia in his chapter (Ch 9) discusses indigenous Indonesians, especially Muslim Indonesians, who started learning Mandarin and even furthered their studies in China.

During the Sukarno era (1957–65), indigenous Indonesians went to study in China, but the number was very small, and they did not have any impact on the indigenous population or society. However, the situation in the post-New Order period (post-May 1998) has been outstanding. Not only that there were ethnic Chinese but also *santri* (Muslim students or graduates of the *pesantren* [Islamic boarding schools]) who studied in China. After returning to Indonesia, many of them became activists who defended China. China's educational soft power has entered Indonesian society and even into the political scene.

Yeremia's chapter focuses on the increasing trend of *santri* Indonesians pursuing further education in China. Chinese culture has often been seen to be incompatible with Islam. The presence of these pro-Beijing

Indonesian indigenous Muslims has challenged the previous perception. However, Yeremia also noted that "China alone does not determine the overall outcome of its soft power projection in Indonesia. Power asymmetry between Indonesia and China does not imply that China always holds the dominant position in their interaction."

The chapter further demonstrates the limitations of the *santris'* activism in bridging the Indonesian Muslim community and China. For example, despite *Chaguan*—a social media programme run by China-educated *santris*—consistently highlighting the favourable aspects of China, it has not received overwhelmingly positive responses from its viewers. Yeremia finally assesses the limited impact of China-educated *santri* on Indonesia-China relations.

China's educational soft power in the Philippines is also limited. Like Thailand, the Philippines also had diplomatic relations with Taiwan before severing ties in order to establish official diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China. Chinese education is now dominated by Beijing. CIs in the Philippines are welcoming an increasing number of Philippine Chinese and non-Chinese. There are also Filipinos who receive Chinese education in Mainland China. Jane Yugioksing in Chapter 10 discusses the China-educated Filipinos and their perceptions of the PRC. She conducted a small study based on in-depth interviews with twelve China-educated Philippine students. Due to various constraints, the study is small and hence the findings are not representative of the entire population of China-educated scholars in the Philippines.

Nevertheless, Yugioksing's research provides interesting preliminary findings and may offer some directions regarding China-educated Filipinos. For instance, "regardless of the duration of their studies, first-hand experience plays an important role in increasing appreciation and understanding of China, its people, and its society". The opportunities provided through China's scholarship have contributed to a more positive outlook on China among Filipino scholars. Despite controversial issues such as the West Philippine Sea (South China Sea) dispute, participants often expressed belief that China has never colonized any country and that bilateral talks remain the best approach.

Yugioksing also found that economic growth in China influenced many Filipino scholars to study the Mandarin language and pursue degrees in China. Additionally, despite China's different political system, these scholars were impressed by Chinese economic progress after experiencing China first-hand. Therefore, first-hand experience in China is effective in making Filipinos friendly with China. However, Yugioksing concluded

that "due to the relatively small number of China-educated recipients, the impact of China's soft power is not widely felt in mainstream Philippine society".

Chapter 11 on Chinese education in Brunei Darussalam is jointly authored by Hannah Ming Yit Ho and Chang-Yau Hoon. Chinese education had a long history in Brunei but after Brunei attained independence, Chinese schools have been nationalized into trilingual schools and are no longer merely Chinese-medium schools. English, Malay and Chinese (Mandarin) are taught in these schools. Notably, Brunei is the only Southeast Asian state which does not have any CIs. Therefore, the development of the Chinese language in Brunei has become a domestic issue.

Ho and Hoon examine the popularity of Chinese language in Brunei and discover that there was no "Mandarin fever" among Bruneians. Nevertheless, Chinese and non-Chinese in Brunei continue to send their children to "Chinese schools" to study Chinese. The two authors interviewed parents of "Chinese school" students from five schools and enquired about their motivations for wanting their children to learn Chinese. They found that Bruneian parents are not specifically concerned with China's global power in terms of its economic status and soft power within Southeast Asia. On the contrary, academic rigour, institutional reputation and cultural diversity of these Chinese schools are cited as topmost reasons for pursuing a Chinese language education. In other words, the two authors argue that the Chinese-language issue has been depoliticized.

Part IV: China's Soft Power and Popular Culture

China's soft power is also reflected in popular culture such as *wuxia* (武侠) drama, *xianxia* (仙侠) drama, folktales, pop songs and popular performing arts such as *Potehi* (*bu dai xi* 布袋戏). The soft power of China had entered the Southeast Asian arena in the past but was never very forceful. However, rising China has given an opportunity for its popular culture to re-enter Southeast Asia in a more significant way. Chapter 12 on the *xianxia* drama written by Gwendolyn Yap, shows the most recent development of China's popular culture in many Southeast Asian countries.

Xianxia that combines Chinese mythology and culture with fantasy and action has been well-received by Southeast Asian audiences. According to Yap, there are two factors which made *xianxia* drama popular in this region: one is that *xianxia* has been able to become a hybrid cultural product constructed to appeal to regional audiences, and the other is the

recent foray of Chinese streaming services into Southeast Asia. However, the popularity of *xianxia* is threatened by domestic restrictions in China such as the crackdown on online literature where *xianxia* came from. Nonetheless, the continued popularity of *xianxia* in Southeast Asia has led to further China-Southeast Asian collaborations in entertainment and other East Asian countries picking up on the trend. Nevertheless, Yap notes that while *xianxia* gains more attention in the region, how it will benefit China and Chinese policymakers remains unclear. However, she concludes that "from the continued growth of Chinese TV shows in the region and the increased demand for new *xianxia*s, it appears that China's rise in popular entertainment in the region will only continue".

Tran Thi Xoan's chapter (Ch 13) is about the impact of China's popular culture in Vietnam, especially among Vietnamese young people. The spread of this China's soft culture has been closely linked with the rise of China since the turn of the twenty-first-century. China's cultural products have been able to enter international markets and successfully compete with Western and some other Asian countries. Xoan provides an overview of Chinese popular culture products among Vietnamese youth in the last four to five years. She discovered that these products shared a significant proportion of the Vietnamese market for foreign products. Localization of these products made them more popular among Vietnamese youth and in turn, affected their positive perception of China.

Improved ties between Beijing and Hanoi offered opportunities for Vietnamese people to receive more Chinese popular cultural products such as *wuxia* novels, detective literature, TV programmes and movies. Chinese celebrities have also become familiar and closer to Vietnamese audiences. The volumes of these cultural products increased remarkably with Mandarin-language content. Moreover, the Chinese also knew to grasp the boom of consumers who devoted time and money to social media products, especially films and online literature. The online literature, which dealt with "unhealthy" romantic themes, was so popular among the Vietnamese youth that it alarmed the authorities. However, this popularity could not be stopped as these romantic novels are readily available online with numerous websites and fan pages dedicated to them.

The final chapter (Ch 14) in this book is on Chinese Indonesian arts by Josh Stenberg. This chapter is interesting as it covers two aspects of Chinese culture in Indonesia. On the one hand, an older Chinese pop culture has been integrated into a local cultural scene, and hence is no longer linked to the soft power of China; while the other, which is relatively more recent, is still linked to contemporary China, and hence related to China's soft power.

Josh Stenberg presents two case studies related to Chinese culture in Indonesia. One case is the *Potehi* which originated in Fujian, southern China. It gradually became a kind of *wayang* performance which was performed by the Indonesian Chinese in relation to their religious activities connected with the *klenteng* (Chinese temple). *Potehi* usually adopted Chinese historical fiction such as the legend of Sie Jin Kui and Fan Li Hua during the Tang Dynasty. This *Potehi* initially used Hokkien but gradually was replaced by Javanese and Indonesian. The *Potehi* today has become *Wayang Cina* (Chinese Wayang). As it has dissociated itself from the religious activities of its origin, it is now appreciated not only by Peranakan Chinese but also by the *pribumi* population.

The second case is *Yinhua Wenxue* (印华文学) or Indonesian Chinese literature written in Chinese (which differs from Peranakan Chinese literature written in Indonesian. This literature emerged only in the twentieth century but was not well developed. Initially, these authors were nationals of China and hence saw things from China's perspective. During the Suharto period, Chinese schools, organizations and media were banned, and *Yinhua* literature barely survived. After the fall of Suharto, the work of *Yinhua* authors was revived but became more complex. As many Indonesian Chinese nationalized into Indonesian citizens, the works also reflect their national identity. Younger writers preferred to express their ethnic and even Chinese cultural identity that is beyond national boundaries.

Josh Stenberg states that "[t]he two case studies presented serve as illustrations of separate ends of the spectrum of Chinese Indonesian activity: one in which an originally Chinese cultural product becomes absorbed into Indonesian culture, leaving only notional and folkloric traces, and another in which the bond between ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and political identity is deemed valid. These tendencies vary in intensity and proportion regionally and across social classes". Stenberg finally notes that "it is essential to keep both possibilities in mind when discussing not only Chinese soft power in the diaspora but also any aspect of contemporary Chinese Indonesian identity".

Conclusion

The book has addressed the issues of China's soft power in Southeast Asia during the rise of China. This soft power includes Chinese-language education and popular culture. With regard to Chinese education, before the rise of China, Chinese schools were catered to mainly/solely overseas Chinese children. Non-Chinese seldom received Chinese education. But

the rise of China and the export of CIs changed the landscape as CIs are meant for the non-Chinese population as well. China's educational soft power penetrated into the larger non-Chinese community, making Chinese soft power more effective. Chinese popular culture has also infiltrated the non-Chinese population.

Various chapters in this book show that the rising China's soft power in Southeast Asia has grown quite significantly, particularly in terms of the Chinese language and Chinese popular culture. Nevertheless, its popularity still lags behind American soft power. The Chinese language is still not as popular as the English language. The same could also be said for Chinese popular culture. Chinese soft power has met many challenges, especially during intensifying US-China rivalry. The growth of China's soft power faces tremendous challenges in the Southeast Asian region. In my view, its further growth would depend on China's continuous economic power and cordial relations with the Southeast Asian countries.