

RISING CHINA, Chinese Culture and Its Transformation in Southeast Asia

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Edited by
Leo Suryadinata

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Preface

The China and Southeast Asia project, initiated under the Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS) Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, has conducted a series of workshops since 2014, with particular attention to rising China and its soft power. Most recently, in September 2023, the programme organized an international workshop on *China's Culture and Its Transformation in Southeast Asia*.

The workshop focused on the contemporary and highly localized state of Chinese culture in Southeast Asia. Its central question was whether the further localization of local Chinese culture is becoming increasingly challenging, if not impossible, in light of China's growing influence. The term "Chinese culture" is used broadly, covering topics such as language, literature, performing arts, films, mass media, customs, religion and education.

Seventeen writers were invited to examine the current status of Chinese religions, language, literature and performing arts in Southeast Asia. They explored the local characteristics of Southeast Asian Chinese culture, their positions within both local Chinese and non-Chinese societies, and the challenges and prospects they face amid China's rising presence. All authors were invited to revise and resubmit their papers; one writer, however, opted out for personal reasons. Nevertheless, the remaining contributions are included in this volume.

Looking at the collection, it is rare to find a set of papers that examines contemporary Chinese culture in the Southeast Asian region, focusing on Chinese religions, language, literature, music and drama, particularly in the context of China's rise. I am fortunate that Professor Tan Chee-Beng, whom I invited to attend the workshop, not only attended the entire event but also provided a comprehensive overview of the papers. His contribution makes it unnecessary for me to summarize each chapter in this preface or write a separate introduction for this volume.

Readers will notice that this book is the third publication in the *Rising China and Southeast Asia Chinese* series. The first volume, *Rising China and New Chinese Migrants in Southeast Asia* (co-edited by Leo Suryadinata and Benjamin Loh, 2022), was followed by the second volume, *Rising China's Soft Power in Southeast Asia: Impact on Education and Popular Culture*

(edited by Leo Suryadinata, 2024). This third book, *Rising China, Chinese Culture and Its Transformation in Southeast Asia*, completes the series for now. While we plan to pause, many issues and challenges surrounding China's rise and Southeast Asian Chinese remain, and we will continue to monitor future developments.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the writers for their kind cooperation and contributions to this volume. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Senior Director, Research and Deputy Chief Executive Officer Dr Terence Chong for his interest in the subject of new Chinese migrants, and to Dr Norshahril Saat, Coordinator of RSCS, for his support of the project. Lastly, I sincerely thank my team—Gwendolyn Yap, Afra Alatas, Dorcas Gan, Nur Syafiqah Mohd Taufek and Siti Suhaila Mohd Harith—for their assistance with the project and this book.

Leo Suryadinata
16 September 2025
Singapore

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Leo Suryadinata is currently Visiting Senior Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. He was formerly Professor in the Department of Political Science at the National University of Singapore, and Director of the Chinese Heritage Centre, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has published extensively on Southeast Asian politics, ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia and China-ASEAN relations. His recent books on the Chinese overseas include *The Rise of China and the Chinese Overseas: A Study of Beijing's Changing Policy in Southeast Asia and Beyond* (2017) and *Peranakan Chinese Identities in the Globalizing Malay Archipelago* (2022).

Tan Chee-Beng (PhD, Cornell University, 1979) had taught at the University of Singapore, University of Malaya, The Chinese University of Hong Kong and Sun Yat-sen University. He is currently Adjunct Professor, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, Tunku Abdul Rahman University. A cultural anthropologist, he has done research in Malaysia and China. His major publications (ethnic Chinese and localization) include, as author, *The Baba of Melaka: Culture and Identity of a Chinese Peranakan Community in Malaysia* (2021, new edition), *Chinese Overseas: Comparative Cultural Issues* (2004) and as editor, *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Diaspora* (2013) and *Chinese Food and Foodways in Southeast Asia and Beyond* (2011).

Tan Lee Ooi is currently the Director of Research at Penang Institute. Obtaining his PhD from the National University of Singapore, he has published several academic journal articles. He also published two books: *The Dynamics of Cyberspace During the Reformasi Movement in Malaysia* (2010) and *Buddhist Revitalization and Chinese Religions in Malaysia* (2020).

Jack Meng-Tat Chia is Associate Professor of History and Religious Studies at the National University of Singapore. He is a historian of religion whose research focuses on Buddhism and Chinese popular religion. He is the author of *Monks in Motion: Buddhism and Modernity Across the South China Sea* (2020; Indonesian translation, 2022), which was awarded the 2021 EuroSEAS Humanities Book Prize and shortlisted for the 2023 Friedrich Weller Prize. He is currently working on two book projects: *Sisters*

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Kaili Zhao is a Research Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies/School of International Culture, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China. Her research focuses on overseas Chinese enterprises and Brunei study. She is the co-author of the forthcoming monograph, *Navigating the Chinese Experience in Brunei Darussalam: Heritage and Horizons*.

Evi Lina Sutrisno is currently a lecturer at the Political and Social Sciences and Political Science Faculty, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta. She is also a research fellow at the Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Study (CRCS) and Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) in Yogyakarta. She conducts research on ethnic Chinese Indonesian, Chinese religions and ethnic conflicts in the reformation period (1998–present). She did her PhD on Confucianism and its transformation into the Confucian religion in Indonesia.

Hew Wai Weng is a research and teaching fellow at the Alwaleed Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World, the University of Edinburgh. He has published on Chinese Muslim identities, Hui migration and urban middle-class Muslim aspirations in Malaysia and Indonesia. He is the author of *Chinese Ways of Being Muslim: Negotiating Ethnicity and Religiosity in Indonesia* (2018).

Wang Chenwei is the Composer-in-Residence of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Education (Nanyang

Technological University) and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, as well as a council member of the Singapore Chinese Music Federation. As the Head of Research and Education at The TENG Company, he is the main co-author of *The TENG Guide to the Chinese Orchestra* (2019), a 624-page book on instrumentation and orchestration. Chenwei obtained his Magister Artium (five-year Master of Arts) in composition with distinction and an Honorary Award (Würdigungspreis) from the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna.

Chung Yi (PhD in Art Theory) is the Director of the Chung Chen Sun Art Museum in Malaysia, Director and Distinguished Professor of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies at Yunnan University of Finance and Economics in China, Distinguished Researcher of the Chinese Academy of Arts, Art Curator, Art Editor and Art Critic. Her research directions include overseas Chinese art, Nanyang art, Southeast Asian art, Chinese painting art culture, art psychology and art therapy. Academic monographs include “History of Chinese Art in Malaysia”, “A Broad Vision of Musical Anthropology”, “Chinese Painting Art and Culture” and “Malaysian Contemporary Art”. She has compiled nearly fifty art albums, picture albums, art biographies and art textbooks. In 2002, she won the first prize in the Shaanxi Provincial Humanities and Social Sciences Research Monograph Category, and in 2017, she won the Global Outstanding Chinese Youth “Artistic Figure Award”.

Chua Soo Pong is a significant contributor to the arts and cultural diplomacy in Singapore. He has been actively serving the arts community in Singapore as an art advocate, critic and acted as advisor for over a dozen dance, theatre and literary groups since the early 1980s in Singapore. Dr Chua is the Founding Director of the Chinese Opera Institute and the first Senior Specialist of SEAMEO SPAFA Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts. Currently he is an Adjunct Professor of the Singapore Raffles Music College.

Khoo Kiak Uei is currently an Associate Professor at the Department of Chinese Studies at Xiamen University Malaysia. He specializes in Chinese linguistics, with current research interests in Global Mandarin Study, Malaysian Mandarin Study and study in Malaysian Chinese dialects. He also published research papers, including “Malaysian Mandarin Variation with Regard to Mandarin Globalisation Trend”, “On Standardization of Malaysian Mandarin Lexicons”, “Lexical Descriptive Analysis of ‘Youzhe’

in Malaysian Mandarin" (written in Chinese), "A Unique Interrogative Sentence Structure 'VP + *meiyou*' in Malaysia Spoken Mandarin" (written in Chinese).

Wong Yoon Wah is now the Dean of Faculty of Chinese Studies and Senior Professor of Chinese Studies at Southern University in Malaysia. He received both his MA and PhD degrees from the University of Wisconsin. He was Professor and Head of Department of Chinese Studies at the National University of Singapore before he retired in 2003. A veteran writer who has won many literary awards including Singapore Cultural Medallion, ASEAN Cultural Award (in literature) and Southeast Asia Write Award (Thailand). Professor Wong's creative works are in prose and poetry, including *Beyond Symbols*, *Taste of Durian*, *Tropical Rainforest* and *British Colony* (the English version renamed *The New Village*). As an academic, Professor Wong is a scholar specializing in Chinese literature, comparative literature and Chinese literature in Southeast Asia.

Tan Chee Lay (PBM) is Associate Professor and Deputy Head of Asian Languages and Cultures at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, with a PhD in Chinese literature from Cambridge University. He was the NLB Lee Kong Chien Research Fellow and George Lyndon Hicks Fellow and has published almost thirty creative writing and academic books. As deputy chief editor of the *Journal of Chinese Language Education* (CSSCI), he also sits on steering boards and advisory panels of the Ministry of Education, National Heritage Board, National Arts Council, Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism, The Art House, Singapore Press Holdings and the Singapore Book Council.

Shirley O. Lua is an Associate Professor of Literature at De La Salle University, Manila. Her research interests include Philippine Chinese literature, film criticism and genre studies. Her critical work on Philippine Chinese literature includes "Dragons Becoming Shrimps: Toward a Chinese-Philippine Poetics" (dissertation, 2001), "The Repeating Parian: Tropic Positions of Chinese-Philippine Fiction in English" in *Writing Asia: The Literatures in Englishes* (2007), and "Recreating the World in Twenty-First-Century Philippine Chinese Speculative Fiction", *Prism: Theory and Modern Chinese Literature* (2022). She co-edited the book anthology *Direk: Essays on Filipino Filmmakers* (2018).

Kornphanat Tungkeunkunt is currently an Associate Professor of History at Thammasat University in Thailand. Born and bred Thai-Chinese, Kornphanat obtained her PhD in Chinese Studies from the National University of Singapore. She has authored numerous journal articles in Thai, Chinese and English, and has also published Thai textbooks on Chinese history for general readers. She was a Visiting Fellow at the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme of ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in 2024. Her recent research centres on Asian sound cultures, as well as China's presence in the regional entertainment industry.

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