



Rising China, Chinese culture and its transformation in Southeast Asia

edited by Leo Suryadinata, Singapore, ISEAS Publishing, 2026, xiii + 253 pp., SG\$44.09 (pbk), ISBN 9789815306101

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BOOK REVIEW

Rising China, Chinese culture and its transformation in Southeast Asia, edited by Leo Suryadinata, Singapore, ISEAS Publishing, 2026, xiii + 253 pp., SG\$44.09 (pbk), ISBN 9789815306101

Leo Suryadinata, prolific doyen of the study of Chinese cultures and societies in South East Asia, shows no signs of slowing down. The book under review is the third in Suryadinata's *Rising China* series with ISEAS, after *Rising China and New Chinese Migrants in Southeast Asia* (2022, edited with Benjamin Low) and *Rising China's Soft Power in Southeast Asia: Impact on Education and Popular Culture* (2024). The outcome of a workshop hosted by ISEAS in 2023, this collection brings together fifteen chapters covering current aspects of Chinese culture in South East Asia. It comprises an introductory part with essays by Tan Chee-Beng and Suryadinata, followed by three sections on religion, music and opera, and language and literature.

Tan, long a leading anthropologist specializing on Chinese communities in South East Asia, opens with an overview of the book, which he uses to remind readers of the independence and mutability of culture, highlighting that there is 'always a local process of creation and transformation' (10) and expressing scepticism about alarmist claims surrounding the rise of the PRC. Instead, he encourages readers to attend to the local and specific as well as to the enduring attraction of Chinese civilizational identity, as carefully distinguished from political China. Suryadinata's sweeping historical overview of Chinese acculturation in South East Asia provides a reminder that the degree of acculturation has tended to be linked to the relative strength of China.

The section on religion features five chapters. Tan Lee Ooi examines the modernizing reformist impulses of 'Buddhist revitalization' as urban Chinese Malaysians have reorganized, rationalized and reinterpreted Buddhism in response to modernity, nation-building pressures and transnational religious currents. Eve Sutrisno's examination of Indonesian Confucian institutions shows the strategies deployed to represent Confucianism as a religion to the satisfaction of the state. Her chapter provides a useful and concrete timeline for what has often been a thorny problem, Confucianism's status in Indonesia. Kaili Zhao and Chang-Yau Hoon offer a case study of how Chinese culture in Brunei attempts to carve out spaces for activity under the state ideology of Malay Islamic Monarchy. Jack Meng-Tat Chia's study of Buddhist rock music in Indonesia shows how it accommodates itself to the taste of middle-class Chinese Indonesian urbanites, not least by mimicking Christian rock's appeal to respectability. Expanding his landmark work on Chinese Muslims in Malaysia, Hew Wai Weng shows how Hui Muslim arrivals can position themselves as a bridging group between the exclusively-coded categories of Islam and Chineseness. Reading these chapters alongside one another, we see religion as a place of intense negotiation between Chinese groups, majority societies and the state.

Acculturation and adaptation of performing arts (specifically, music and Chinese opera) is the focus of the next section. While Wang Chenwei focuses on how South East Asian elements have been integrated into composition for Chinese orchestras in Singapore, Chung Yi is concerned with the institutional structures that make Chinese music groups in Malaysia more or less feasible, with interesting observations about teacher training, competition for space and sponsorship. Chua Soo Pong, irrepressible as ever, provides an

optimistic account of Chinese opera's adaptations in Singapore, including his own productions the *Ramayana*, first created in Teochew opera and subsequently toured in various generic iterations.

The concluding five-chapter section concerns language and literature. Khoo Kiak Uei's intriguing findings on Malaysian Mandarin are valuable, though the chapter stands out in a section otherwise concerned with *belles lettres*, with Wong Yoon Wah tracing the genesis of Chinese-language Malaysian literature, Shirley Lua considering the presence of the 'Chinese mind' in Philippine-Chinese literature, and Tan Chee Lay offering a brief but illuminating account of the struggle between modernism and realism in Singapore's mid-century Chinese-language literary scene. The regional skew that still marks the field (privileging maritime South East Asia over the mainland countries) is to some extent remedied by Kornphanat Tungkeunkunt and Gritiya Rattanakantadilok's welcome, albeit regrettably brief, chapter on Thai Sinophone literature.

Considered as a whole, this book represents a valuable compendium for scholars and students concerned with contemporary questions of Chinese culture in South East Asia. Suryadinata's work as editor offers something like a state of the field, especially if one reads this volume alongside the two earlier *Rising China* books. Several of the contributors' chapters reflect updates, expansions or reflections on topics of their established expertise (e.g. Chia on Indonesian Buddhism; Sutrisno on Confucianism; Wong on Malaysian literature; Lua on Philippine literature). In Suryadinata's telling, the 2023 workshop was initially prompted by the sense that Chinese culture's localization in South East Asia might be arrested due to the rise of the PRC. On balance, the chapters tend to pull away from, rather than towards, the titular concept of 'Rising China': the regional influence of the PRC on Chinese communities, while discernible in other recent scholarship (including the first two *Rising China* volumes), rarely emerges as an important factor in the developments of Chinese culture here. The exception is Khoo's linguistics paper, showing Malaysian Mandarin's growing orientation toward PRC rather than Taiwanese Mandarin.

Rising China, Chinese Culture and Its Transformation in Southeast Asia is agreeably anchored in case studies and careful attention to local conditions rather than dominated by the geopolitical narratives and anxieties that too often constrain humanities studies: the takeaway is almost never that China's rise is overwhelming historically determined local cultures. The result is a diverse and up-to-date book with essays in dialogue with one another on the negotiations and transformations of Chinese culture in the region.

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