

BOOK REVIEW

Negotiating Leviathan: Transnational Mobility of People, Capital and Ideas in the Shadow of China's Influence in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia: Beyond Borders and Boundaries, eds. Samuel C.Y. Ku and Herlin Chien. Taiwan: Wenzao University Press, 2018.

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The region Southeast Asia as a subject of academic inquiry has long fascinated scholars who are interested in its strategic location that straddles the two great civilisations of China and India. Colonialism, especially since the 19th century, effectively carved and moulded the region into its current form with all its commonalities and cleavages (Reid 1988; Lieberman 2003). In the mid-20th century Southeast Asia assumed a special importance for policymakers as the region became deeply embroiled in the Cold War, manifested by the Vietnam War and numerous communist insurgencies. Centres for Southeast Asian Studies were established in various prominent universities in the USA, UK, and Australia, in order to study and understand the region in a deep, systematic, and trans-disciplinary manner. Since the end of Cold War in 1991 academic interest in Southeast Asia has gradually dwindled as the focus shifts to the conflict-ridden Middle East and the rising might of China. Southeast Asia as an area study is in need of re-evaluation and its importance to theory-making must be emphasised so as to stave off irrelevancy (Chou and Houben 2006; Sears 2007; Kuhonta, Slater and Vu 2008). The book *Southeast Asia: Beyond Borders and Boundaries*, edited by Samuel C.Y. Ku and Herlin Chien operates in similar vein as it looks at the region through its fluid interconnectivity that transcends national boundaries but also hamstrung by domestic interests and institutional paralysis of ASEAN, and how this dynamic is shaped by socio-economic-political forces from within and without, chief among which is the looming spectre of its omnipotent next-door neighbour China.

In Malaysia, the topic of China's preponderant influence in the country's economy emerged into the spotlight during the 14th General Elections in 2018. The RM55 billion construction of the East Coast Rail Line (ECRL) and the USD100 billion real estate development of Forest City in Johor became major campaign issues as the then opposition Pakatan Harapan (PH) accused the Barisan Nasional (BN) government of surrendering the country's sovereignty to China by agreeing to lopsided loan arrangements and allowing thousands of Chinese nationals to own properties on Malaysian soil (*South China Morning Post* 2018). Engaging with China for the sake of regime survival is of course nothing new. Chapter 4 in the book discusses from the historical perspective Malaysia's relations with China in the context of regime interests versus national interests. Similarly, one can argue that the afore-mentioned China-funded mega projects in Malaysia only served the interests of the erstwhile BN regime as it grappled with the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) financial scandal despite the regime's assurance that these projects were vital national interests (*Free Malaysia Today* 2019). When it comes to its dealing with China, the book avers that the former BN government "adopted a two-stage decision making process, with the consideration of regime interest [coming] first and the national interest [coming] next" (p. 81).

Chapter 5 meanwhile looks at Malaysia's environmental policies in relation to Taiwan's "New Southbound Policy." However, contemporarily, it is China's appetite for energy that holds sway over some of Malaysia's environmental regulations. For instance, the recent lifting of the moratorium that bans bauxite mining in the state of Pahang has exercised the ire of the environmentalists and local communities as they see the decision as a capitulation to the aluminium industry, where more than half of the demand for bauxite comes from China (*BBC News* 2016). Another example is the production and export of palm oil. With the European Union agreeing to ban the import of palm oil due to the industry's destructive environmental practices, the decision naturally drives Malaysia deeper into China's warm embrace as it seeks to cover the loss from the ban (*The Edge Markets* 2018). In short, the EU's oil palm import ban has no discernible effect on improving Malaysia's environmental policies as China's insatiable thirst for natural resources can easily offset the export reduction that resulted from the ban.

Nevertheless, influx of Chinese business investments and nationals in Malaysia does not always arouse xenophobic sentiment and suspicion among the population. Chin Yee Whah in his ethnographic study of Chinese female peddlers in Sibul, Sarawak in Chapter 2 shows that the locals are receptive of the Chinese nationals peddling their imported goods in local markets, so much so that they would even protect these Chinese migrant entrepreneurs from raids by local authorities. This is mainly due to the fact that Malaysia has strict licensing and immigration policies that severely limit the entrepreneurial opportunity of these foreign peddlers, which, in turn, makes them less of an economic threat to the

local traders. In comparison, the two above-mentioned mega projects – ECRL and Forest City – have been accused of bringing in Chinese nationals as workers at the expense of local Malaysians, a sore point that relates to the question of whether these projects are for the benefit of the former BN regime or the country (*Malay Mail Online* 2019; *Malaysiakini* 2018). It is apparent that as long as Malaysian locals do not see the Chinese migrants as competitors, be it for jobs or commercial opportunities, then there are no hostilities involved.

One important point discussed by the book is the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in facilitating and reconciling transnational interests among its members. ASEAN for example has succeeded in luring Vietnam away from its isolationist stance by welcoming the country into ASEAN community, which comes with numerous economic advantages such as access to a vast regional market with more than 600 million people. Member nations of ASEAN are largely more agreeable with each other when it comes to economic and health interests, as opposed to matters such as security and domestic conflicts or crises. Chapter 9 looks at ASEAN's policy framework and implementation in dealing with communicable diseases such as rabies, avian flu and leptospirosis (rat fever), among others, which pose dangers that travel beyond national boundaries. ASEAN as a regional organisation has been successful in formulating a common framework to combat these communicable diseases but falters at the implementation end of it due to unequal resources and disparity in technical capabilities among its member nations. The disparity of domestic needs among ASEAN's member nations is also exploited by China in order to secure its interests in the region especially in the highly disputed South China Sea. As Chapter 10 illustrates, despite ASEAN's relative diplomatic success in engaging China through its ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the primacy of member nations' domestic interests ultimately precludes ASEAN from acting as a single cohesive political entity and thus providing China with the opportunity to establish bilateral deals with each member nation at the expense of ASEAN as an organisation.

ASEAN's impotency at resolving regional conflicts and dysfunctional "non-interference" policy are laid bare by the Rohingya refugee crisis, which is curiously not covered by the book. The Rohingya refugee crisis is a clear illustration of the book's overarching theme of people's movement across nation-state boundaries in the region, albeit in a way that is forced, cruel, and dehumanising. Many member nations of ASEAN such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand are significantly affected by the refugee crisis, which is not exclusively delimited by Myanmar's national boundary. Member nations are reluctant or even outright refuse to house these refugees who are inhumanely treated by the local authorities. This is where ASEAN leadership is found wanting – a topic which would have made a timely and substantive addition to the myriad of issues covered by the book.

In all, this edited book further enriches the discourse of transnational movement of people, goods, capital and ideas across Southeast Asia. It is particularly pertinent in light of the active role played by China in trying to secure its interests in the region, either through ASEAN or by direct negotiation with each member nation. In Malaysia, as in many other countries around the world, China's heavy investment in costly infrastructure projects has sparked spirited domestic debate and strong pushback from civil society. A current discussion on Southeast Asia has to incorporate the overbearing influence of the global juggernaut that is China, which this book has managed to accomplish.

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