

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

## <Book Review>

Enze Han

Leo Suryadinata, ed. *Rising China's Soft Power in Southeast Asia: Impact on Education and Popular Culture*. Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024.

*Southeast Asian Studies*, 1-4 (in press).

## How to Cite:

Han, Enze. Review of *Rising China's Soft Power in Southeast Asia: Impact on Education and Popular Culture* edited by Leo Suryadinata. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 2026, 1-4 (in press). DOI: 10.20495/seas.br26004.

## View the table of contents for this issue:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2026/03/earlyview-br-enze-han/>

**Subscriptions:** <https://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

**For permissions, please send an e-mail to:**  
english-editorial[at]cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



Leo Suryadinata, ed. *Rising China's Soft Power in Southeast Asia: Impact on Education and Popular Culture*. Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024.

Reviewed by Enze Han\*

This edited volume by Leo Suryadinata continues his leadership in producing scholarship on China-Southeast Asia relations and the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. As a sequel to the edited volume *Rising China and Chinese New Migrants in Southeast Asia* (Suryadinata and Loh 2022), this book builds on the research of a network of scholars in Southeast Asia on China Southeast Asia relations but goes one step further to focus specifically on China's recent rise of soft power in education, language, and art in Southeast Asia. With contributors mostly hailing from Southeast Asia, this book comprehensively examines the recent intensification of educational engagements between China and Southeast Asia and their broader implications on Chinese soft power. In this book review, I will first provide a general summary of each chapter of the book and then I will provide more detailed review on a couple of select chapters that I personally find very interesting and worth pursuing further analysis on. Finally, I will offer a reflection on how this edited volume informs us about China's increased soft power through education in Southeast Asia.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part provides a general overview, focusing on China's historical and contemporary relations with the overseas Chinese community in the region and their implications for understanding how renewed education engagement between China and Southeast Asia means for the former's soft power in the latter. Building on this foundation, the second part examines China's soft power through education in Mainland Southeast Asia, while the third part continues this theme, shifting the focus to Maritime Southeast Asia. Finally, the fourth part delves into the role of popular culture in advancing China's soft power, rounding out an interesting collage of perspectives on its impact in Southeast Asia.

The first three chapters collectively examine China's history of engagement with the overseas Chinese community in Southeast Asia, through various institutional, educational, and cul-

---

\* 韓恩澤, Department of Politics and Public Administration, The University of Hong Kong  
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8948-3843>

tural avenues. Tan Chee-Beng provides an overview of China's historical and existing diasporic institutional frameworks and media strategies for promoting its soft power in Southeast Asia. Leo Suryadinata lists detailed historical and current practices of Chinese-language education in Southeast Asia, including the expansion of Confucius Institutes and the role of Chinese tertiary education and Chinese students in Southeast Asia. Neo Peng Fu focuses on the dynamics of Chinese language teaching, exploring the reliance on expatriate teachers from China versus the development of local talent in countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Together, these chapters provide a solid background for understanding China's cultural and educational outreach in Southeast Asia as the region with the greatest overseas Chinese population and where China has a long history of diasporic engagement

These next four chapters explore China's soft power and education in Mainland Southeast Asian countries. Sivarin Lertpusit examines how the expansion of Chinese education in Thailand in recent years has shaped Thai people's perceptions of China, supported by data from a questionnaire of such opinions, as well as detailed analysis of some notable examples of Thai academics who have pursued higher education in China. Aranya Siriphon, also focusing on Thailand, discusses the shifting dynamics of the Yunnanese KMT community in Northern Thailand in terms of their shifting identities and perceptions towards educational cooperation with Mainland China versus Taiwan. Lim Boon Hock highlights China's soft power in Laos, using empirical data to assess local perceptions of Chinese education and the opportunities that learning Chinese would provide. Shihlun Allen Chen provides an analysis of Chinese education in Cambodia, distinguishing between China-led versus domestic Mandarin educational initiatives.

Following these are another four chapters that examine China's soft power and education in Maritime Southeast Asia. Ngeow Chow Bing and Fan Pik Shy provide detailed statistics on Malaysians studying in China, the number of Confucius Institutes in Malaysia, and a brief discussion on the Xiamen University's campus in Malaysia. Ardhitya Eduard Yerima explores the experiences of *Santris*, who are non-ethnic Chinese Muslim boarding school students in Indonesia that have pursued higher education in China. Jane Yugioksing's chapter assesses China's soft power among China-educated Filipinos, with temporal examination on their pre-China concerns, living experiences in China, and post-China reflections. Hannah Ming Yit Ho and Chang-Yau Hoon instead focus on Chinese language education in Brunei, emphasizing the multicultural experiences offered by the Chinese schools in contrast with local ones.

Finally, another three chapters explore China's soft power in Southeast Asia through recent trends in the export of Chinese pop culture and arts. Gwendolyn Yap examines the influence of *Xianxia* dramas, which are TV series in Chinese mythological styles, in terms of their rising popularity in Southeast Asia. Tran Thi Xoan's chapter discusses the impact of Chinese pop culture on Vietnamese youth, particularly through the import of Chinese words and language patterns in contemporary Vietnamese society. In the last chapter of the book, Josh Stenberg

focuses on the hybrid nature of Chinese Indonesian arts and literature, showcasing how these cultural forms reflect and enhance China's soft power.

Together, the chapters provide a comprehensive overview of recent trends in educational engagement and soft power outreach from China in Southeast Asia. The authors should be commended for their scholarly contributions, despite some variability in quality and chapter length. Some chapters are a bit too generic, but others are full of solid empirical data from the region with more rigorous methodology.

Overall, I find some chapters particularly interesting and deserving of further discussion. For example, Siriphon's chapter, building on her previous work, offers an updated analysis of the competition between Mainland China and Taiwan for influence over Chinese language education within the KMT community in Northern Thailand. The Yunnanese community, which has a longstanding history of support from the Taiwanese government due to their involvement in anti-communist insurgencies during the Cold War, now faces the growing presence of Beijing-backed schools in the region. This development provides a compelling lens to examine the shifting identities and loyalties within this community, set against the broader context of cross-strait dynamics between Beijing and Taipei.

Similarly, Yerima's chapter on the educational experiences of the Santris and their political activism upon returning to Indonesia is especially noteworthy. Departing from the conventional focus on ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia reconnecting with their ancestral homeland through education, Yerima highlights the experiences of non-ethnic Chinese Muslim boarding school students from Indonesia studying in China. This perspective is both fresh and eye-opening. In the context of Western media's focus on the Xinjiang situation and allegations of mistreatment of Muslims in China, Yerima's chapter offers an alternative view, shedding light on how Muslim students from the world's most populous Muslim country perceive these issues.

Another chapter I found particularly engaging explores the popularity of *Xianxia* dramas from China in Southeast Asia. Chinese TV shows, movies, and short videos have gained significant global traction, largely due to the accessibility of Chinese video-sharing platforms. This chapter's focus on *Xianxia* dramas, as well as the occasional inclusion of boy-love themes, offers an intriguing lens to examine their appeal in Southeast Asia. However, while the chapter takes a broad approach, I would have appreciated more firsthand perspectives on why these dramas resonate particularly with Southeast Asian audiences.

I also found the chapter on Chinese pop culture among Vietnamese youth particularly thought-provoking and worth further reflection. It is fascinating to observe how contemporary Chinese vocabulary is gradually making its way into the Vietnamese language, building on the historical legacy of Chinese loanwords that have long been embedded in Vietnamese. It is thus worthwhile to ponder the implications of such Chinese pop culture influence in Vietnam given

the nationalistic sentiments in Vietnam against China in the context of territorial disputes between the two countries.

Overall, I believe this edited volume is a valuable and timely contribution to the existing body of research on the growing engagement between China and Southeast Asia in the realms of education and culture. By addressing diverse topics, from the educational experiences of Southeast Asian students in China to the cross-border influence of Chinese pop culture, the volume provides rich insights into the multifaceted interactions shaping the region. Its interdisciplinary approach not only deepens our understanding of China's soft power implications but also sheds light on the nuanced dynamics of educational and cultural engagement between China and Southeast Asia. This makes it an essential resource for scholars, policymakers, and anyone interested in this evolving relationship.

## References

Suryadinata, Leo and Loh, Benjamin, eds. 2022. *Rising China and Chinese New Migrants in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.