

SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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

<Book Review>

Li Yuqing

Enze Han. *The Ripple Effect: China's Complex Presence in Southeast Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024.

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

How to Cite:

Li Yuqing. Review of *The Ripple Effect: China's Complex Presence in Southeast Asia* by Enze Han. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 2026, 1-4 (in press). DOI: 10.20495/seas.br26015.

View the table of contents for this issue:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2026/03/earlyview-br-li-yuqing/>

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

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



Enze Han. *The Ripple Effect: China's Complex Presence in Southeast Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Li Yuqing*

How should countries in Southeast Asia, as a region of neighbors, interact with a strong neighbor like China? How is China's influence in Southeast Asia measured and manifested? In *The Ripple Effect: China's Complex Presence in Southeast Asia*, the author of *Asymmetrical Neighbors* (Han 2019) continues to explore a latent issue that arises when neighboring countries or regions have an asymmetrical relationship with respect to national power. What influence does a dominant nation have on its less powerful neighbors? In an era dominated by great power competition, the theme explored in *The Ripple Effect* resonates deeply within both international political studies and policymaking circles in China and Southeast Asian countries.

To study China's various influences in Southeast Asia, Enze Han clarifies in the introduction that the book explicitly draws on Evelyn Goh's concept of "influence," defined as "the act of modifying or otherwise having an impact upon another actor's preferences or behavior in favor of one's own aims" (p. 9). However, Goh's emphasis on the intentional aspect of Chinese influence narrows her scope. This emphasis leads researchers to focus solely on China's state-level influence, overlooking the intentional and unintentional impacts from a diverse range of Chinese actors. Therefore, this book borrows from the American sociologist Robert Merton's concept of "unintended consequences," conceptually distinguishing between the traditional research assumptions of Chinese state-intended influence and those situations where intentions are unclear. The author believes that the unintentional nature of non-state actors is key to understanding the complexity of China's presence in the Southeast Asian region, marking a significant theoretical contribution of this work. In subsequent chapters, the author analyzes China's influence on Southeast Asian countries in terms of political, economic, and cultural impacts.

Chapter 2 outlines China's political influence on certain Southeast Asian countries, with Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand as examples. It describes three modes of influence on authoritarian governments: direct support for authoritarian regimes, such as Myanmar's military junta; economic engagement that inadvertently buttresses authoritarian rule, exemplified

* 李宇晴, Institute for International and Area Studies, Tsinghua University

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5798-1386>

by Cambodia; and the means by which authoritarian governance can facilitate orderly governance, as seen in Thailand. These examples provide a clear view of how economic and political influence can intersect. While the narrative is coherent and the conclusions clear, the use of rumors from biased media sources casts a shadow on the credibility of some of the more definitive conclusions presented in the analysis (p. 18). This issue is particularly acute in discussions about China's explicit support for Myanmar, where there seems to be a lack of direct evidence to back this claim. The author also clarifies in the conclusion of this chapter that the Chinese government appears to be merely supporting the incumbent government without specifically backing the military regime in Myanmar (pp. 20, 37).

Chapter 3 provides an overview of China's economic influence in Southeast Asia, focusing on significant infrastructure projects like high-speed railways (HSR) in Laos, Thailand, and Indonesia. It examines how Chinese investments leverage special economic zones established by some regional governments and discusses Thailand's Rayong Industrial Park in detail. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China has promoted a series of infrastructure projects, including ports, railways, and roads, which not only enhance regional connectivity but also boost local economies. For example, the HSR projects in Laos and Thailand, part of the Pan-Asia Railway Network from Kunming to Singapore, are expected to significantly facilitate the movement of goods and people, enhancing the region's economic vitality. As China's global economic status continues to rise, the author foresees its economic presence in Southeast Asia expanding further, deeply influencing the economic development of the countries in the region and the regional economic landscape.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss China's economic impacts from the perspectives of agriculture and the gray or illicit economies, respectively. Chapter 5 addresses the impact of China's growing population and middle class on Southeast Asia's economy. The Chinese demand for products like durian has driven some Southeast Asian farmers to shift their agricultural focus, potentially bringing about environmental, social, and political challenges. The author calls for more regulation and sustainable development strategies to balance benefits and costs. Chapter 6 discusses the parallel flow of legal investments and illegal "black money" from China. This chapter examines the growth of the online casino economy, closely linked to Chinese capital seeking investment opportunities in Southeast Asia. A lack of national regulation and rampant corruption in the region have facilitated the growth of such illegal activities.

The narrative on cultural impacts is woven through Chapters 4, 7, and 8. Chapter 4 highlights China's efforts to promote its language and culture in the region, showcasing how these initiatives serve as soft power extensions. Chapter 7 offers insights into the diaspora dynamics, examining how recent migratory trends from China are reshaping interactions in host countries, particularly Thailand. Centering on Thailand, Chapter 7 places this massive demographic movement within the context of China's long history of migration to Southeast Asia, while

highlighting the similarities and differences among various waves of migration. It specifically discusses three types of movement: tourists, businesspeople, and students. As China's middle class expands, more Chinese tourists are selecting Southeast Asia as a travel destination. Their consumer behaviors and cultural practices have a marked influence on the tourism and service sectors of the host countries, occasionally giving rise to cultural clashes and misunderstandings. The presence of Chinese businesspeople in Southeast Asia represents another notable trend. Their commercial activities are closely tied to China's foreign direct investment and trade initiatives, driving local economic growth while also prompting debates over foreign investment and the spread of influence. Education plays a crucial role in facilitating cultural exchange, and a growing number of Chinese students are choosing universities in Southeast Asia. Their presence not only enhances academic exchange but also fosters deeper cultural integration and understanding. As China's influence in Southeast Asia grows, however, the Thai attitude toward China has become complex. On the one hand, Chinese investments and tourists are seen as drivers of economic development; on the other hand, there is concern over the expansion of China's economic and political influence.

Chapter 8 delves into the factors influencing the varied responses of Southeast Asian countries to Chinese influence. It discusses the concept of diaspora politics and its impact on the interactions between these countries and China. This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the history of Chinese migration to the region and examines the diverse treatments that migrants receive in countries such as Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand. It also explores how governance practices within the diaspora have adapted in response to China's dramatic ascent in recent decades and assesses the implications of these shifting power dynamics for Beijing's relationships with the diaspora and these nations. The dynamics of diaspora politics are likely to continue shaping perceptions of China across the region and will influence future interrelations.

The book's chapters are well structured, presenting a complex landscape of China's influence across mainland Southeast Asia and highlighting many economic and cultural impacts that result in unintended consequences. There is no doubt that this book is highly valuable for addressing regional concerns and understanding China-Southeast Asia relations. I would like to discuss a particular aspect of the book's analytical framework, especially as presented in Chapter 2. The reliance on a dichotomous analysis of democracy versus authoritarianism—a perspective rooted in post-Cold War thinking—may obscure the more pragmatic dimensions of China's impact. Beijing has adopted a pragmatic strategy centered on safeguarding China's security and economic interests, with ideological factors playing a far less central role than often assumed (Saba and Akbarzadeh 2025). While the primary drivers of Myanmar's civil conflict remain its internal dynamics (Peng 2025), a balanced view must acknowledge the substantial role of outside interactions.

This book discusses China's complex presence in Southeast Asian countries from the political, economic, and cultural perspectives. The author also conducted a timely analysis of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that COVID-19 was not just a global health crisis but also profoundly altered the dynamics of international relations, especially between China and Southeast Asia. Lockdowns and travel restrictions exposed the vulnerabilities of regional dependencies and may lead some countries to consider economic and supply chain diversification. In the post-pandemic era, Southeast Asia will continue to seek greater autonomy within the global political and economic landscape, potentially driving the region to maintain cooperative relations with China while also seeking a balance with other major powers. While challenges and opportunities coexist, the future relationship between China and Southeast Asian countries will continue to shape the region's future through mutual dependence and cooperation. The thoughtful examination in the book provides a comprehensive, interdisciplinary perspective that will aid policymakers in navigating the complex relationships within this dynamic region.

References

- Han, Enze. 2019. *Asymmetrical Neighbors: Borderland State Building between China and Southeast Asia*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Saba, Arif and Akbarzadeh, Shahram. 2025. Promoting Authoritarianism? Continuity and Change in China's Policy Towards Myanmar (1990–2023). *Journal of Contemporary China*, January: 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2449057>.
- Peng, Xu. 2025. The Enduring Legacy and Historical Continuity of Kokang's Mutinies in the China—Myanmar Borderlands. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, March: 1–23. <https://doi:10.1080/00472336.2025.2468511>.