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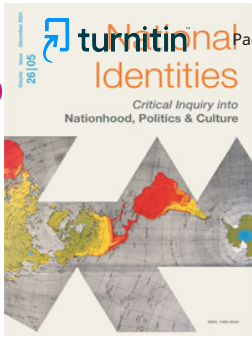
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In the dragon's shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese century

by Sebastian Strangio, London, and New Haven Yale University Press, 2020, 368 pp., paperback, \$18.00, ISBN 978 0 300 23403 9

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2 BOOK REVIEW

In the dragon's shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese century, by Sebastian Strangio, London, and New Haven Yale University Press, 2020, 368 pp., paperback, \$18.00, ISBN 978 0 300 23403 9

7 Sebastian Strangio's latest work explores the intricate relationship between China and South-east Asian countries. This book provides a comprehensive analysis of China's contemporary involvement in the region, offering historical context and reflecting on its implications for the twenty-first century. Drawing on his journalistic expertise, Strangio delivers an informative and trustworthy account, setting a high standard for scholars and students studying Sino-Southeast Asian bilateral relations. Despite the region's importance in global business and international politics, research on Southeast Asia's dynamics is sparse. Historically, Southeast Asia has been a crucial trade route and a significant player in global political activities, notably in anti-communist propaganda during the Cold War. The decline of Western influence after the end of the Cold War, coupled with China's rise, has positioned Southeast Asia as a strategic partner for China, offering an alternative to the USA and the European Union. Strangio's work is timely, appearing during pivotal global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the US leadership transition. The book underscores Southeast Asia's growing influence and China's strategic involvement in the region. Each chapter addresses different Southeast Asian countries, highlighting China's multifaceted relationships, from economic partnerships to political alliances. Among these are Cambodia and Laos, whose strategic importance for China is examined in spite of their limited influence.

4 Following the end of the Cold War, countries affiliated with Western countries, in particular the United States, reduced their intervention in Southeast Asia in line with their declining influence and the 'awakening of China' (p. 185). Southeast Asia was one of the first regions targeted by the former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping for investment, and the position of China is very strategic. Hence, cooperation with China is a promising alternative to the USA and the EU. Some may view the decline in US influence and the shift in China's policies as a stroke of luck for Southeast Asia, but it is important to note that 'luck is a situation where preparation meets opportunity' (p. 15). Regarding the phenomenon of preparation and opportunity, Strangio devotes attention to the extraordinary work entitled *In The Dragon's Shadow* (Strangio 2020).

In the *Dragon's Shadow* examines not only historical issues but also the economic and political dynamics of a rapidly changing world from a contemporary perspective. This book appears at the right time because first, it discusses an area that is often neglected on the global map, even though Southeast Asia has considerable influence. Second, it was published in the COVID-19 period during the leadership transition from Donald Trump to Joe Biden in the United States and the development of Brexit in the United Kingdom. Third, it points out that both China and Southeast Asia and, more specifically, China's involvement in Southeast Asia, will play a key role in the twenty-first century. The author has conducted various scientific studies, worked as a journalist, and visited the Southeast Asian countries to cover issues related to human rights. Chapter one presents recent Chinese political policies and concludes that China was not seeking to 'overthrow and replace the US-backed global security order' (p. 19), but that 'China's position is more ambivalent' (p. 20). It wanted to 'reclaim something from the centrality it enjoyed in East Asia before the conquest by Western powers and imperial

Japan in the 19th and 20th centuries' (p. 21). Chapter one ends by exploring China's multi-layered historical relationship with Southeast Asia. The remainder of the book considers national territories, starting with Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines. Furthermore, it unravels a complex web of ties, from the region's ethnic Chinese community to China's growing role as an ally and investor, as well as an alternative to US/EU support that often hinges on democratisation and commitment to human rights. The author deals effectively with each nation's relations with China, while only Cambodia and Laos are discussed in the same chapter. This is because both countries do not have less economic or political influence than other Southeast Asian nations such as Indonesia, which is densely populated, or Singapore, which is small but mighty. Although Cambodia and Laos are included in the same chapter, the presentation is detailed. Strangio effectively describes both countries' bargaining power in relation to China, which could radically change their economic, political, and social situation. For example, Cambodia is the most prominent because its bargaining position enables it to disregard past violation of human rights when still under the shadow of the Khmer Rouge regime.

The author also explains how the dilemma that emerged due to an unsafe China-backed construction project caused the death of Cambodian workers, even though the project greatly helped their economy. Furthermore, it demonstrates why China's billion-dollar trade and investment deal is making headlines. Laos, just across the border from China, illustrates this further on account of its combination of poverty and war and resulting underdevelopment. Therefore, a new wave of Chinese investment and migration entails a changing landscape and economy, with roads, railways and dams included within the business expansion. Laos' position, whether in terms of geographical proximity, underdevelopment, or ideological ties, means that its experience with China is one to watch out for in the future. This shows that the Laos Communist Party has learned a lot from China about turning towards economic liberalisation while retaining power.

A slight drawback in this book is that there is no discussion about Brunei Darussalam and Timor Leste; since these countries have fewer economic agreements with China, hence there is not much to be explained. This book is nonetheless interesting because it conveys much information in a balanced manner without bias, and sets a high standard for future works on the same topic. In addition, it is good for readers who wish to expand their knowledge of what the twenty-first century means on a global level, and for dedicated observers of China who are interested in understanding more about the country's impact.

Sebastian Strangio's book, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, offers a comprehensive examination of China's complex and evolving relationships with Southeast Asian countries. By blending historical context with contemporary analysis, Strangio highlights the impact of China's rise on the political and economic landscapes of these nations. The work underscores China's strategic manoeuvres and investments in the region, providing an alternative to the diminishing influence of Western powers, particularly the United States and the European Union.

Strangio's investigative rigor and journalistic expertise render the book a reliable and informative resource for understanding the multifaceted interactions between China and Southeast Asia. Each chapter meticulously addresses the unique dynamics of individual countries, revealing the depth of China's influence from economic investments to political alliances. Notably, the analysis of Cambodia and Laos offers critical insights into how even the region's less influential nations navigate their strategic importance to China.

Despite the absence of discussions on Brunei Darussalam and Timor Leste, the book succeeds in painting a detailed and balanced picture of the broader regional implications of China's policies. Strangio's work sets a benchmark for future studies on this topic and is essential reading for anyone interested in the geopolitical shifts shaping the twenty-first century. It

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serves not only as an academic resource but also as a vital guide for policymakers and analysts seeking to understand the future trajectory of Southeast Asia amidst China's growing global influence.

Dani Fadillah

Department of Communication Science, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
School of Journalism and Communication, Nanjing Normal University,
Jiangsu, Peoples Republic of China
✉ dani.fadillah@comm.uad.ac.id

Zhou Huiquan

School of Journalism and Communication, Nanjing Normal University,
Jiangsu, Peoples Republic of China

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