ASIA PROGRAMME

CHINA'S USE OF SOFT POWER THROUGH CULTURE: LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA AND MALAYSIA

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For centuries, the quest to control and influence Southeast Asia to its advantage has been a goal for many a major power, both regional and global. The territory has been coveted for its geostrategic assets including the economically significant waterways where transitions 60 per cent of international maritime trade[1]. Equally as attractive, underwater fields containing 290 trillion cubic feet of natural gas have been detected and the seas account for approximately a tenth of the global annual fish catch[2]. The United States, India, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan[3] were prominent influencing powers in the region as China, although geographically close, was closed to the global community under Mao. However, the 1989 incident in Tiananmen Square marked a pivotal turning point for China under President Deng Xiao Ping towards modernisation and its repositioning as a participant in the global economy[4]. The new "Open Door" policy for economic growth came with the establishment of a "good neighbour" strategy, whereby China started to actively improve relations with the countries in its immediate periphery[5] and persuade them of Beijing's peaceful intentions regarding its rise to power[6]. Southeast Asia was from then on considered as a pilot area and regional platform for China to test its strategies which would be subsequently carried out globally, ultimately to emerge as a major world power[7].

As shaping its "back yard" was defined as the most accessible gateway for China's global expansion, it became strategically critical to attract Southeast Asian countries into its sphere of influence and away from that of competing powers; much like the United States' application of the Monroe doctrine throughout North America. One of the main arguments used by China was a shared concern regarding the United States' trade and their

[1] Schrag, J. (2020, August 26). *How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?* ChinaPower Project.
[2] Kurlantzick, J. (2015). *A China-Vietnam Military Clash* (No. 26). Council on Foreign Relations: Center for Preventative Action.
[3] Schmidt, J. D. (2008). China's Soft Power Diplomacy in Southeast Asia. *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, *26*(1), 22–49.
[4] Ralston, D. A., Gustafson, D. J., Terpstra, R. H., & Holt, D. H. (1995). *Pre-post Tiananmen square: Changing values of Chinese managers. Asia Pacific Journal of Management, 12(1), 1–20.*
[5] Ba, A. D. (2003). China and Asean: Renavigating Relations for a 21st-century Asia. *Asian Survey*, *43*(4), 622–647.
[6] Rouiaï, N. (2018). *Sur les routes de l'influence : forces et faiblesses du soft power chinois — Géoconfluences*. Géoconfluences ENS de Lyon.
[7] Stromseth, J. (2019). *China's rising influence in Southeast Asia and regional response*. Global China, Assessing China's Growing Role in the World

enforcement of human rights policies[8]. As Southeast Asian nations banded together to create the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), their aim was to ensure domestic and regional stability, economic development, as well as a group effort to balance the American influence in the region. China was able to find common ground with the multilateral organisation on these bases to form a "community of common destiny[9]". Through this new relationship, Beijing multiplied its policies both multilaterally with the ASEAN and bilaterally with the individual member states in the interest of creating a stable regional environment. This would enable continued Chinese economic development and the creation of foundations for future economic growth, both to ensure the domestic and international legitimacy of the communist regime[10], as well as, ultimately, use the achieved regional hegemon status to springboard towards global influence.

The United States has had an economic-political-military relationship with Southeast Asia since the 1890's and have often acted unilaterally, insensitively and with impunity in the region[11]. By using military force and economic strength, the United States' presence in the region can be coined as using Hard Power, defined as an ability to reach one's goals through coercive actions or threats[12]. However, as ASEAN increasingly started looking to balance Washington's influence, China opted to tap into that narrative and formulated a Soft Power strategy, based on the ability to attract people to their side without coercion[13]. As legitimacy is key, China's "benignity" discourse would be able to generate Soft Power through the production of gratitude and sympathy, enabling Southeast Asian nations to unlatch themselves from the United States' influence and simultaneously support their nation's growth through economic ties with Beijing. By persuading nations to shape their

[8] Ba, A. D. (2003). China and Asean: Renavigating Relations for a 21st-century Asia. *Asian Survey*, *43*(4), 622–647.
[9] Stromseth, J. (2019). *China's rising influence in Southeast Asia and regional response*. Global China, Assessing China's Growing Role in the World
[10] Ba, A. D. (2003). China and Asean: Renavigating Relations for a 21st-century Asia. *Asian Survey*, *43*(4), 622–647.
[11] Stevenson, C. (1992). U.S. Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia: Implications for Current Regional Issues. *Contemporary Southeast Asia, 14*(2), 87-111.
[12] Raimzhanova, A. (2015). *Power in IR: Hard, Soft, and Smart*. Institute for Cultural Diplomacy and the University of Bucharest.
[13] Pallaver, M. (2011). *Power and Its Forms: Hard, Soft, Smart*. Department of International Relations of the London School of Economics.

agendas according to China's foreign policies and allure a sense of cooperation rather than confrontation[14], Beijing ensures its "peaceful ascendancy"[15].

In order to achieve its ultimate goals of developing its economy and securing its energy supply[16], Beijing works towards integrating its neighbours into a Sino-centric network of economic, political, cultural, and security relations. Within this overarching strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This multibillion-dollar project has been called a Chinese Marshall Plan and constitutes a state-backed campaign for global dominance through Chinese investment worldwide[17]. The BRI aims to connect Asia, Africa and Europe by land and sea. Specifically in Southeast Asia, this connection of countries would enable China to have control over ASEAN member states' transport links, work towards dominating Asia's inland waterways and gain control over the South China Sea[18]. Equally, the BRI would enable China's lesser developed provinces to access increased opportunities for economic development and for Chinese companies to sell off their excess stocks and develop their operations at an international scale[19]. To successfully implement the BRI, China began reconnecting with its 30 million "overseas Chinese" residing across Southeast Asia[20]. By engaging the "Huaren" local citizens of Chinese descent and the "Huaqiao" Chinese citizens abroad, China seeks to influence local politics and use the communities as a bridge to effectively implement the BRI.

Soft Power encompasses many elements from the investment in cinema to the organisation of major international events such as the Olympic Games. However, this study will analyse how China's "Charm Offence[21]" through culture, language and education has attempted to influence both Cambodia and Malaysia. This integration is self-serving, ultimately positively impacting China's economic, political, geostrategic

[14] Po, S. (2017). The limits of China's influence in Cambodia: A soft power perspective. *UC Occasional Paper Series*, *1*(2), 61–75.
[15] Hsiao, M. (2008, November 24). *Transformations in China's Soft Power toward ASEAN*. The Jamestown Foundation.
[16] Rouiaï, N. (2018). *Sur les routes de l'influence : forces et faiblesses du soft power chinois — Géoconfluences*. Géoconfluences ENS de Lyon.
[17] Kuo, L., & Kimmenda, N. (2018, July 30). *What is China's Belt and Road Initiative?* The Guardian.
[18] Kurlantzick, J. (2006). China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia. *Current History*, *105*(692), 270–276.
[19] Riga, D. (2019). Les Nouvelles routes de la soie : Projet sino-centré ou projet d'hégémonie ? *Asia Focus*, *121*, 1–22.
[20] Stromseth, J. (2019). *China's rising influence in Southeast Asia and regional response*. Global China, Assessing China's Growing Role in the World
[21] Kurlantzick, J. (2006). China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia. *Current History*, *105*(692), 270–276.

efforts. Tan Puay-Ching mentions, "Language is one of the basic components of culture. It is a vital element of ethnic identity… [quite simply] language and education are two indispensable instruments for sustaining one's culture[22]". Indeed, China specifically targets language and education in an attempt to create closer ties with ASEAN countries and further its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), ultimately aiming for the title of regional hegemon.

CAMBODIA, A TESTING GROUND FOR CHINA'S NEW SOFT POWER INITIATIVE OF "SPREADING CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING"

The wide spreading of Confucius Institutes and Chinese education: major factors in determining Cambodia's "pro-China" attitude

Since Xi Jinping's decision to reopen China to the world in an effort to reclaim its standing as global hegemon that he believed was rightfully theirs[23], China has developed a highly proactive form of neighbourhood diplomacy. In order to further China's own objectives and secure power and influence over the region, Beijing set out to create a "community of common destiny"[24] between China and Southeast Asian countries. Indeed, Xi's dream of a "shared future" aims to link China and ASEAN communities to "bring out their respective strengths to realise diversity, harmony, inclusiveness and common progress for the benefit of the people of the region and beyond[25]". To do so, China made a conscious decision to implement its Soft Power strategy explicitly outlined in the White Book on foreign policy[26] across Southeast Asia. At the 17th People's Republic of China (PRC) Congress, President Jintao encouraged China "to enhance culture as part of [Chinese] Soft Power to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests[27]". It has been argued that the aim of using this angle as opposed to a Hard Power approach or the coercive power wielded through inducements or threats is to improve China's image and

[22] Puay-Ching, T. (1984). In Collins, A. (2006). Chinese Educationalists in Malaysia: Defenders of Chinese Identity. *Asian Survey*, 46(2)
[23] Riga, D. (2019). Les Nouvelles routes de la soie : Projet sino-centré ou projet d'hégémonie ? *Asia Focus*, 121, 1–22.
[24] Stromseth, J. (2019). *China's rising influence in Southeast Asia and regional response*. Global China, Assessing China's Growing Role in the World.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Struye de Swielande, T. (2009). *La Chine et le Soft power : une manière douce de défendre l'intérêt national ?* (No. 2). Université catholique de Louvain.
[27] Ibid.

battle against what Beijing considers as a distorted perception of China recounted by the media. Indeed, the country strives to go against the depiction of a Chinese threat and convince the world of its pacific intentions[28]. At a regional level, China allegedly wishes to increase its influence and foster peaceful relationships with its neighbours in order to develop its economy and ensure its electricity supply[29].

At the core of China's Soft Power is the promotion of its culture and language[30]. By transmitting Chinese culture outside its borders and wielding social influence in Southeast Asia, the hope is that these cultural exchanges will in the long run affect policies in the domestic political arena and develop the targeted country's preferences and interests to be in-line with China's. This will therefore lead to closer relationships between China and ASEAN states and a clearer path for the former to achieve its goal of becoming a hegemon.

In fact, China focuses on two specific aspects of culture in order to ensure its Soft Power influence over Southeast Asia: language and education through Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms (CCs). Although CCs are regarded as the most controversial instrument of China's public diplomacy, they are the most prominent. According to the Hanban, China's National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, CIs "devote themselves to satisfying the demands of people from different countries and regions in the world who learn the Chinese language, to enhancing understanding of the Chinese language and culture by these peoples, to strengthening educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries, to deepening friendly relationships with other nations, to promoting the development of multiculturalism, and to construct a harmonious world[31]". As such, they provide Chinese language teaching, Chinese teacher training, teaching resources, holding the Chinese Proficiency Test and for the Certification of Chinese Language Teachers, as well as information and consultative services regarding China's education and culture. Chinese literature describes CIs as a unique and successful combination of traditional Chinese culture and diplomacy and a

[28] Barr, M. (2011). Mythe et réalité du soft power de la Chine. *Études Internationales*, 41(4), 503–520.
[29] Rouiaï, N. (2018). *Sur les routes de l'influence : forces et faiblesses du soft power chinois — Géoconfluences*. Géoconfluences ENS de Lyon.
[30] Hsiao, M. (2008, November 24). *Transformations in China's Soft Power toward ASEAN*. The Jamestown Foundation.
[31] Hartig, F. (2017). *Chinese Public Diplomacy: The Rise of the Confucius Institute* (Routledge New Diplomacy Studies) (1st ed.). Routledge.

"wonderful export good of China's culture[32]". Although the Hanban officially denies its intention of Soft Power projections[33], academics outline CIs as designed to teach the Chinese language and promote Chinese culture, balancing the dominant American cultural influence and improving China's image around the world[34]. Along with the 140 CIs globally, there are 85 academic programmes, 206 partnership programmes between Chinese and foreign institutions[35] and 135 Confucius Classrooms, which act as a focal point for Chinese language learning and teaching through the connection between secondary schools in the host country and the Confucius Institute Network[36].

China's "cultural crusades[37]" have been observed to have more standing in countries where governance is weak[38]. Cambodia, being such a country, presents a long history with China that can be traced back to the 13th century. After much fluctuation during the Cold War, China and Cambodia now boast a thriving relationship both economically and politically with China standing as Cambodia's top foreign investor, major donors and increasingly important trading partner[39]. After a series of successive crises since its independence in 1953, the country still relies on multiple pilot projects carried out by international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as CIDSE (Cooperation Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité), ICC (International Cooperation for Cambodia), CARE International and NTFP (Non-Timber Forest Products) in close cooperation with the Cambodian government[40]. As the China-Cambodia partnership is currently in full bloom, China has taken the opportunity to build a CI in Phnom Penh as well as three CCs, which include thirteen Chinese language teaching stations[41]. With

[32] Hartig, F. (2017). *Chinese Public Diplomacy: The Rise of the Confucius Institute* (Routledge New Diplomacy Studies) (1st ed.). Routledge.
[33] Yang, R. (2010). Soft power and higher education: an examination of China's Confucius Institutes. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 8(2), 235–245.
[34] Cabestan, J.-P. (2008). Learning from the EU? China's changing outlook toward multilateralism. In W. Gungwu & Z. Yongnian (Eds.), *China and the New International Order (China Policy)* (1st ed., pp. 203–217). Routledge.
[35] Rahman, S. (2019). Does the 'Belt & Road Initiative' Possess Soft Power? *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*, 5(1), 301–331.
[36] Hartig, F. (2017). *Chinese Public Diplomacy: The Rise of the Confucius Institute* (Routledge New Diplomacy Studies) (1st ed.). Routledge.
[37] Young, N. (2009, July 5). *The Cultural Crusades*. New Internationalist.
[38] Rahman, S. (2019). Does the 'Belt & Road Initiative' Possess Soft Power? *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*, 5(1), 301–331.
[39] Chheang, V., & Pheakdey, H. (2019). *Cambodian Perspective on the Belt and Road Initiative* (No. 17).
[40] Kosonen, K. (2005). Vernaculars in Literacy and Basic Education in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, *6*(2), 122–142.
[41] Hsiao, M. (2008, November 24). *Transformations in China's Soft Power toward ASEAN*. The Jamestown Foundation.

Cambodia's education system and literacy rates leaving something to be desired, this was a welcome development. Along with the 22 languages spoken across Cambodia including Khmer as the official language, Chinese is also taught as a subject of study in schools[42]. What with the now hundreds of thousands of Ethnic Chinese in Cambodia, implementing its cultural Soft Power strategy through language and education did not pose a challenge for China.

Through these institutes and classrooms, a feeder system has been implemented whereby Cambodian students attend Chinese language schools that receive resources and funding from mainland China. These students can then obtain scholarships to pursue their further education in China. By 2008, there were over 120,000 foreign students enrolled in universities in mainland China as opposed to 8,000 twenty years prior[43]. The underlying aim to this scheme, as Rahman points out, is that university students when returning to their home country have developed a connection to China and its culture and therefore will most likely contribute to change at national level by adopting the "normalised set of practices" learned while at a Chinese university[44]. In the long term, cultural exchanges and ties can have an effect on policies in the domestic political spectrum[45] and in time, could turn the target country into a pro-China state.

This method has proven to be a success in Cambodia, as the Chinese minority in Cambodia as well as the returning students after their university careers in China are able to influence the decisions made domestically[46]. The possibility of working for the government enables them to make decisions which would be more favourable to China. Furthermore, there has been an increase in the practice of Chinese culture amongst Cambodians both with and without links to China, such as the celebration of the Chinese New Year. Schools now close to allow students to celebrate, some even believe the festival

[42] Ibid.
[43] Kurlantzick, J. (2006). China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia. *Current History*, *105*(692), 270–276.
[44] Rahman, S. (2019). Does the 'Belt & Road Initiative' Possess Soft Power? *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*, *5*(1), 301–331.
[45] Nye, J. N. S. (2005). *Soft Power: The Means to Success In World Politics* (Illustrated ed.). Public Affairs.
[46] Po, S. (2017). The limits of China's influence in Cambodia: A soft power perspective. *UC Occasional Paper Series*, *1*(2), 61–75.

will bring them "luck, wealth and happiness" even though Chinese New Year was never a part of traditional Cambodian culture[47].

The Chinese wish to show that its rise is nothing but peaceful was indeed very well received in Cambodia. Prime Minister Hun Sen who used to describe China as a "root of all evils" in the 1980s now praises and depicts China as a "most trustworthy friend"[48]. Now that both countries are committed to create "a Cambodia-China community of common destiny with strategic significance", they have agreed upon continuing to maintain close high-level contacts, enhancing the role of the intergovernmental coordination committee, coordinating defence and law enforcement sectors at all levels as well as accelerating the implementation of the BRI[49]. China's implementation of CIs in neighbouring countries as part of their foreign policy is therefore not completely devoid of Soft Power as would affirm the Hanban, but more specifically open up possibilities of expanding China's BRI into ASEAN countries and crystallise its grip over those countries through perceived peaceful partnerships and mutual growth.

Not so innocent: culture ties as a gateway to increase Chinese economic power

Since its new phase of reopening, China has set itself goals to achieve in order to gain standing and power on the international playing field. The primary objective is to maintain peace in the region[50]. By securing peace, China enables its economy to grow and ensures ample opportunities abroad for Chinese companies. Second is China's wish to limit Taiwan and Japan's influence over Southeast Asia. Since 1994, the country has implemented a policy that aims to use "all economic and diplomatic resources to reward countries that are willing to isolate Taiwan[51]" and therefore have been actively pushing both states out of regional diplomacy. In the same way, Beijing is focused on shifting

[47] Po, S. (2017). The limits of China's influence in Cambodia: A soft power perspective. *UC Occasional Paper Series*, *1*(2), 61–75.
[48] Hutt, D. (2017, March 3). *Hun Sen sings a different tune on China*. Asia Times.
[49] Hsiao, M. (2008, November 24). *Transformations in China's Soft Power toward ASEAN*. The Jamestown Foundation.
[50] Kurlantzick, J. (2006). China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia. *Current History*, *105*(692), 270–276.
[51] Ibid.

ASEAN states away from Washington's influence[52]. China is applying the same strategy in Southeast Asia as the United States carried out in North America decades ago, where countries in the region would treat China's interests with more importance than their own domestic affairs, and therefore turn to China instead of the United States for solutions. Finally, one of Beijing's key medium for China to exert economic diplomacy and expand its economic and political presence in Southeast Asia is its Belt and Road Initiative[53]. Through this structure, China could access Southeast Asia transport links, work towards dominating Asia's inland waterways and gain control over the South China Sea[54]. Furthermore, the BRI would enable China's lesser developed provinces to access increased opportunities for economic development and for Chinese companies to sell off their excess stocks and develop their operations at an international scale[55]. In effect, China's wish to create a harmonious world is primarily to enable peaceful development using non-aggressive means to serve their own interest[56].

When assessing which of its neighbours would be the most advantageous to influence in order to find a stable first base from which to expand its influence from through the BRI, Cambodia presented itself as the perfect candidate. With Chinese-Cambodian relations secured through the inauguration of CIs in Phnom Penh, an important Chinese minority established in Cambodia diffusing their culture locally, and the flow of aid[57], China's giant state corporations and family-owned firms started to invest billions of dollars in mines, textile operations, highways, oilfields and dams. As a major provider of cheap energy and with China now dominating the Cambodian investment landscape, Beijing regards Cambodia as an essential piece in its BRI infrastructure project as it is so essential for Chinese capital[58].

With China's investment flows and infrastructure developments providing economic and social progress, Cambodia quickly positioned itself on China's side. With government

[52] Kurlantzick, J. (2006). China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia. *Current History*, *105*(692), 270–276.
[53] Chheang, V., & Pheakdey, H. (2019). *Cambodian Perspective on the Belt and Road Initiative* (No. 17).
[54] Kurlantzick, J. (2006). China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia. *Current History*, *105*(692), 270–276.
[55] Riga, D. (2019). Les Nouvelles routes de la soie : Projet sino-centré ou projet d'hégémonie ? *Asia Focus*, *121*, 1–22.
[56] Rahman, S. (2019). Does the 'Belt & Road Initiative' Possess Soft Power? *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*, *5*(1), 301–331.
[57] Hutt, D. (2016, September 1). *How China Came to Dominate Cambodia*. The Diplomat.
[58] Ibid.

officials stating that Cambodia's prosperity and development "could not be detached" from Chinese investment[59], Phnom Penh has increasingly been pushing the Chinese agenda or making decisions to favour Beijing's position when voting on regional issues at ASEAN summits. Prime Minister Hun Sen, the most loyal to the "One China" policy of the ASEAN member states' leaders[60], shares China's views on the South China Sea dispute and has regularly blocked ASEAN joint communiqués to avoid criticising the Chinese actions in the South China Sea[61]. In return for this cooperation, China promised Cambodia hundreds of millions of dollars in aid and loans[62]. Furthermore, Hun Sen fervently supports China's national reunification as well as its policy on Uyghur asylum seekers' deportation, to which they participated despite international indignation[63]. In 2014, Sam Rainsy, then leader of the opposition, stated that Cambodia was "on the side of China, and we support China in fighting against Vietnam over the South China Sea issue… The islands belong to China[64]". However, even though it is internationally believed that Cambodia is an extension of China's foreign policy, the Prime Minister Hun Sen increasingly boasts that "Cambodia cannot be bought[65]" and that he manipulates both Washington and Beijing to serve his country's interest.

In the face of one of its members being so vehemently pro-China, ASEAN member states have found it difficult to agree with Cambodia's positioning, especially considering the primary pillars on which the ASEAN was created. The institution was built on the notions of close and beneficial cooperation and collaboration to ensure a prosperous and peaceful community for the Southeast Asian nations[66]. However, with Cambodia creating close relations with China and increasingly acting in their favour, the ASEAN decided to suspend Cambodia's membership in the bloc for a short period of time to deter the country from acting in such a way[67]. Moreover, with China so deeply involved in Cambodia's foreign policy, it is simultaneously becoming more involved in the domestic

[59] Hutt, D. (2016, September 1). *How China Came to Dominate Cambodia*. The Diplomat.
[60] Chheang, V., & Pheakdey, H. (2019). *Cambodian Perspective on the Belt and Road Initiative* (No. 17).
[61] Po, S. (2017). The limits of China's influence in Cambodia: A soft power perspective. *UC Occasional Paper Series*, *1*(2), 61–75.
[62] Hutt, D. (2016, September 1). *How China Came to Dominate Cambodia*. The Diplomat.
[63] Chheang, V., & Pheakdey, H. (2019). *Cambodian Perspective on the Belt and Road Initiative* (No. 17).
[64] Hutt, D. (2016, September 1). *How China Came to Dominate Cambodia*. The Diplomat.
[65] Ibid.
[66] *Overview*. ASEAN | ONE VISION ONE IDENTITY ONE COMMUNITY.
[67] Hutt, D. (2016, September 1). *How China Came to Dominate Cambodia*. The Diplomat.

affairs of Southeast Asian states. Non-interference in internal affairs of neighbouring states is both one of ASEAN and China's core principles but with China's BRI project steadily expanding and bringing with it a wave of cultural, political and economic influence, ASEAN countries have become reticent towards China's presence and influence over the internal politics of the institution[68].

Noticeable cracks, China's influence questioned

Although Cambodia's past and present leaders have favoured China and actively upheld a close partnership with them in order to advance Cambodia's development and economic growth, the Cambodian population has not unanimously supported this relationship or China's influence. One of the local populations' major complaints and concerns is the fact that China's investment and infrastructure development projects do not meet their development needs[69]. An example of this is the transformation of Preah Sihanouk, one of Cambodia's most famous seaside resorts, into a casino town through Chinese large-scale investment channelled by the BRI. This resulted in soaring property prices and worsening living conditions for the Cambodian locals, who blame the Chinese entirely. Furthermore, the wealth that is brought to Cambodia through these Chinese investments allegedly only benefit the Chinese community. Visitors mainly come from China, buy from Chinese businesses, eat at Chinese restaurants and holiday in Chinese hotels therefore very little revenue trickles down to benefit the Cambodian population[70].

Furthermore, Chinese influence and presence due to their "cultural crusade" has been said to have aggravated the state of corruption, impede good governance and the practice of human rights throughout Cambodia[71] as well as deteriorated Cambodia's resources and natural environment[72]. The Chinese influence over Cambodia resulted in the latter

[68] Stromseth, J. (2019). *China's rising influence in Southeast Asia and regional response*. Global China, Assessing China's Growing Role in the World.
[69] Rahman, S. (2019). Does the 'Belt & Road Initiative' Possess Soft Power? *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*, *5*(1), 301–331.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Po, S. (2017). The limits of China's influence in Cambodia: A soft power perspective. *UC Occasional Paper Series*, *1*(2), 61–75.
[72] Heng, P. (2013, July 16). *Chinese investment and aid in Cambodia a controversial affair*. East Asia Forum.

accepting the construction of a Chinese dam on the upper Mekong River, which is deteriorating the local environment. Although the Cambodian government is tolerating this, this occurrence puts into jeopardy millions of Cambodians' livelihoods as they mainly depended on these waters for drinking, irrigation, fishing and income[73]. China's influence over Cambodia is therefore so all-encompassing that it is putting into play domestic values and care for the country's own citizens.

Additionally, scholars believe CIs to be propaganda or spying tools implemented in order to detect any behaviours or teachings abroad that go against China's desired position as hegemon[74]. Cambodian politicians have on many occasions complained about the Chinese support for the party currently in power [75] and journalists have also reported that anytime they attempt to write about topics that did not shine a positive light on China's policies, such as Taiwan, the Chinese embassy would harass them until the article was retracted[76]. By enforcing these mechanisms and therefore essentially controlling Cambodia's development from the top, Beijing halts any possibility of Cambodian citizens attempting to control their own country's destiny[77].

Finally, the shortcomings of China's attempts in co-opting Cambodia to see it as the sole regional hegemon can be observed within Cambodia's youth. A survey was carried out amongst 500 Cambodian university students regarding both China and the United States' foreign policy; the results concluded that although the majority of Cambodian students acknowledge the Chinese contribution to their country's development, roughly 70 percent of them preferred to see Cambodia developing better relations with the United States[78]. China's Soft Power strategy and implementation in Cambodia remain therefore rather limited, at least from the perspective of Cambodia's younger generations who

[73] Var, V. (2016). *Cambodia should be cautious when it comes to Chinese aid*. East Asia Forum.
[74] Zanardi, C. (2016). China's soft power with Chinese characteristics: the cases of Confucius Institutes and Chinese naval diplomacy. *Journal of Political Power*, *9*(3), 431–447.
[75] Kurlantzick, J. (2008). *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World (A New Republic Book)*. Yale University Press.
[76] Kurlantzick, J. (2006). China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia. *Current History*, *105*(692), 270–276.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Heng, K., Toch, S., Sao, C., Chet, V., & Chan, D. (2017). Perceptions of Cambodian university students on Cambodia's foreign policy toward the US and China. *UC Occasional Paper Series*, *1*(1), 41–67.

would prefer maintaining close ties with the United States over China[79]. The reasoning behind these students' convictions could be due to a sense of acculturation, the phenomenon occurring when the groups of people with different cultures, contact with each other for a long term, can make a change in the culture of one or both groups[80], or a preference for the American Dream over the Chinese Dream. The Prime Minister Hun Sen has said, "I would like to assure the public and send this message to the world and the Cambodian people that I will not allow China to occupy Cambodia[81]" but, even with the few noted limitations, China's influence over Cambodia is undeniably far-reaching and increasingly enmeshed in Cambodian culture, economy, politics and geostrategy.

MALAYSIA, FROM A "MALAY FIRST" STATE TO A REINTEGRATION OF CHINESE CUSTOMS

From hurdle to hurdle, the ongoing struggle of Chinese Education in Malaysia

Identity, according to Collins, is considered as the "lifeblood of society", whereby in the event of removing or suppressing a society's identity, it will inevitably cease to exist as it is prevented from being transmitted from one generation to the next[82]. In the event of a minority existing within a state's population, it may believe or fear that the majority ethnic group will want to assimilate the minority into the dominant identity in order to effectively carry out nation building[83]. Malaysia is one of these multi-ethnic, multi-culture and multi-religious countries in Southeast Asia. For centuries, some of the major regional ethnic groups have coexisted within Malaysian state borders even though they have distinct identities and the state has, since its independence, been implementing preferential policies to manage ethnic issues[84]. After an important influx of Chinese

[79] Po, S. (2017). The limits of China's influence in Cambodia: A soft power perspective. *UC Occasional Paper Series*, *1*(2), 61–75.
[80] Nguyen, V. S., & Bui, T. M. T. (2017). Acculturation the Southeast Asian Countries Create the Asean Cultural Identity to Promote the Regional Interests in the Course of Globalization1092. *Saudi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *2*, 1092–1096.
[81] Kurlantzick, J. (2006). China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia. *Current History*, *105*(692), 270–276.
[82] Collins, A. (2006). Chinese Educationalists in Malaysia: Defenders of Chinese Identity. *Asian Survey*, *46*(2), 298–318.
[83] Xia, N., Yang, Y., & Lee, Y. F. (2018). Chinese Education in Malaysia under Malaysian Ethnic Politics. *Journal of Politics and Law*, *11*(2), 23.
[84] Xia, N., Yang, Y., & Lee, Y. F. (2018). Chinese Education in Malaysia under Malaysian Ethnic Politics. *Journal of Politics and Law*, *11*(2), 23.

immigration to Malaysia in the early nineteenth century[85], the Chinese Malaysians currently represent nearly 30 per cent of the nation's population and have been a strong economic driver. Along with the Indian minority, the Chinese immigrants have insisted on keeping their strong ethnic identity and culture alive, notably through the establishment of a Chinese education system throughout Malaysia and consider themselves as Chinese as opposed to the Malays and the Tamils[86]. Ethnic tensions have recurrently arisen as a result; the Chinese have not wished to become acculturated over the last century and have fervently fought for their right to retain a Chinese education system in order to pass down their culture, language and values against a Malay state whose main objective is to create a unified nation with Malay culture at its centre.

Although Malaysia is the only country that has a complete Chinese education ranging from primary school through to university outside of mainland China[87] offering a possibility of Chinese Soft Power and influence dissemination, this education system has been contested since Malaysia was still a British colony. The Malaysian government assures that it has and will continue to respect the political reality of its pluralistic society and ensure that the Chinese community has the freedom and capacity to develop its own education and preserve its culture; the Chinese, however, believe otherwise[88].

The creation of Chinese private schools in Malaysia was said to be in order to satisfy the Chinese immigrant community's wish to educate their children in accordance to their homeland traditions[89]. But since then, Chinese education has faced the impact of a number of national educational policies and restrictions. The minority generally believes that without resistance, their right to educating their future generations according to the Chinese curriculum, using Mandarin as a medium of education and using Chinese

[85] Raman, S. R., & Sua, T. Y. (2015). *The development of Chinese education in Malaysia: Problems and challenges* (No. 2). ISEAS Working Paper Series.
[86] Freeman, A. L. (2001). The Effect of Government Policy and Institutions on Chinese Overseas Acculturation: The Case of Malaysia. *Modern Asian Studies*, *35*(2), 411–440.
[87] Xu, L. L., & Xu, P. (2016). *The Popularization of Chinese Language in Multilingual Environment based on the Analysis of Examples from Malaysia*. 2nd International Conference on Modern Education and Social Science.
[88] Xia, N., Yang, Y., & Lee, Y. F. (2018). Chinese Education in Malaysia under Malaysian Ethnic Politics. *Journal of Politics and Law*, *11*(2), 23.
[89] Thock, K. P. (2013). Impact of language policy and nation-building in ethnic hegemonic state: issues challenging the resilience of Malaysian Chinese schools, 1995-2008. *Journal Of Chinese Literature And Culture*, *1*, 17–44.

educational resources to pass on the culture, would have been eradicated[90]. As language is deemed a core element of ethnic identity and education plays a significant role in safeguarding and passing on identity and language, both are vital when sustaining ethnic culture and identity[91]. The Chinese Malaysian community, therefore, in the face of decrees restraining their rights to stage public cultural performances or to acquire land to build Chinese schools, places of worship and burial, mobilised to defend and fight for its cultural space[92]. However, while the Chinese community was concerned by this Malay favouritism and the primacy of the majority's ethnicity even within the country's constitution, they were willing to compromise in exchange for concessions on citizenship eligibility, moderate protection of their education system and minimal disruptions made to the Chinese economic position[93].

Ethnic Malaysians, on the other hand, have a diametrically opposing stand to the Chinese Malaysians in terms of keeping ethnic identities and cultures alive and separate. After the declaration of independence from Britain, the main objective for the Malay majority was to solve the nation-building problem and work towards national unity by launching a series of policies which favoured their own community[94]. The process of nation building was based on ethnic Malaysian or "Bumiputra"-defined identities and centred around Malaysian culture with the aim of Malay becoming one day the single language in the country without the need for Chinese or Indian education. Indeed, while officially accepting the presence of Chinese schools, the consecutive Prime Ministers post-independence imposed a series of Malay-dominated policies to expand the assimilation process to foster a national identity and unify the heterogenous population[95]. This quest for national identity which would include all minorities would facilitate national

[90] Freeman, A. L. (2001). The Effect of Government Policy and Institutions on Chinese Overseas Acculturation: The Case of Malaysia. *Modern Asian Studies*, *35*(2), 411–440.
[91] Segawa, N. (2019). *National Identity, Language and Education in Malaysia: Search for a Middle Ground between Malay Hegemony and Equality (Asia's Transformations)* (1st ed.). Routledge.
[92] Matondang, S. A. (2016). The Revival of Chineseness as a Cultural Identity in Malaysia. *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *19*(4), 56–70.
[93] Freeman, A. L. (2001). The Effect of Government Policy and Institutions on Chinese Overseas Acculturation: The Case of Malaysia. *Modern Asian Studies*, *35*(2), 411–440.
[94] Xia, N., Yang, Y., & Lee, Y. F. (2018). Chinese Education in Malaysia under Malaysian Ethnic Politics. *Journal of Politics and Law*, *11*(2), 23.
[95] Collins, A. (2006). Chinese Educationalists in Malaysia: Defenders of Chinese Identity. *Asian Survey*, *46*(2), 298–318.

integration through the widespread use of the Malay language and culture[96] and limit the external influence of regional powers such as China through the prominence of a minority other than Bumiputras on Malaysian soil. The political, economic, cultural and educational rights and interests of the Chinese ethnic groups were therefore increasingly put aside but as the Malay ultimate goal was a unified nation, there was no possibility of having any racial polarisation which was believed to be enshrined through distinct educational systems[97]. Indeed, Malaysia's policies want to reflect a desire to "manage the ethnic cleavages, not to ignore or subsume them[98]".

Following the Malay nation-building path intending for a monolingual policy based on Malay becoming the national language, the multilingual education system was only allowed at primary level[99]. Chinese and Tamil primary schools, or vernacular schools, were accepted alongside Malay-medium schools, or National Schools, but beyond that, Malay was imposed as the language of instruction in the aim of integrating all three ethnic groups under one national system. After the Razak Report of 1956, all primary schools, even the vernacular schools, were funded and recognised by the government[100] and the curriculums were largely similar with the language medium being the main differentiation factor[101]. In effect, since 1st January 1962, children were guaranteed primary schooling in their native tongue, if they wished it[102]. However, the allocation of funds was not made to be either proportionate or stable. From 1971 to 1978, the bulk of development funds, representing 91 per cent, went to the National Schools. The Chinese primary schools only received 7 per cent of the total development funds[103]. It was also observed that since the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000), the allocation of

[96] Paauw, S. (2009). One land, one nation, one language: An analysis of Indonesia's national language policy. *University of Rochester Working Papers in the Language Sciences*, *5*(1), 2–16.
[97] Thock, K. P., & Tan, Y. S. (2014). Identity and Cultural Contestation in a Plural Society: The Development of Chinese Education in Malaysia. *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture*, *2*(1), 156–175.
[98] Matondang, S. A. (2016). The Revival of Chineseness as a Cultural Identity in Malaysia. *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *19*(4), 56–70.
[99] Raman, S. R., & Sua, T. Y. (2015). *The development of Chinese education in Malaysia: Problems and challenges* (No. 2). ISEAS Working Paper Series.
[100] Freeman, A. L. (2001). The Effect of Government Policy and Institutions on Chinese Overseas Acculturation: The Case of Malaysia. *Modern Asian Studies*, *35*(2), 411–440.
[101] Abdullah, M., Liaw, O., & Husin, W. (2012). 1Malaysia: National Education Challenge and Nation Building. *International Journal of Social, Management, Economics and Business Engineering, World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology*, *6*(10), 423–432.
[102] Murray, D. P. (1964). Chinese Education in South-East Asia. *The China Quarterly*, *20*, 67–95.
[103] Raman, S. R., & Sua, T. Y. (2015). *The development of Chinese education in Malaysia: Problems and challenges* (No. 2). ISEAS Working Paper Series.

development funds to the Chinese primary schools had dropped below 4 per cent. Indeed, from 1962, it was decided that funding would only be allocated to those schools which switched over to National Schools and used Malay and English as their main languages of instruction. An additional decree was officialised whereby national public exams would only be given in English or Malay, which hindered the development of Vernacular schools including Chinese primaries and their enrolment levels[104]. Therefore, although officially the Malaysian government and population recognise Chinese schools as part of the national education system, their development and sustainability have time and time again been jeopardised and thus, so has the passing on of culture and language to the next Chinese Malay generation in favour of an ethnically unified Malaysia.

A handful of secondary Chinese schools had been established when, in 1960, the Rahman Talib Report declared that secondary schools had to convert their teaching medium to either English or Malay in order to receive government funding. Furthermore, the Minister for Education was granted the power to convert all Vernacular schools to National schools[105]. In 1967, the National Language Act was then formulated with the aim of excluding other languages by making Bahasa Malaysia the sole national and official language in Malaysia [106]. Some argue that the Malay government intended to cut off the Chinese secondary school students' path of studying abroad and that "the implementation of this policy meant that the government intended the non-converted Chinese secondary school live and die on its own"[107]. A few Chinese secondary schools converted to private self-funding institutions in order to be able to carry out their curriculum in Mandarin. Other private schools exist such as the Islamic religious schools where Arabic and Bahasa Malaysia are the mediums of instruction; these are, however, government funded as they follow the policy of Malay as medium of instruction[108]. These measures put in place to limit both funding and the accessibility of Chinese instruction is perceived by the Chinese

[104] Freeman, A. L. (2001). The Effect of Government Policy and Institutions on Chinese Overseas Acculturation: The Case of Malaysia. *Modern Asian Studies*, *35*(2), 411–440.
[105] Ang, M. C. (2014). *Institutions and Social Mobilization*. ISEAS Publishing - Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
[106] Xu, L. L., & Xu, P. (2016). *The Popularization of Chinese Language in Multilingual Environment, based on the Analysis of Examples from Malaysia*. 2nd International Conference on Modern Education and Social Science.
[107] Xia, N., Yang, Y., & Lee, Y. F. (2018). Chinese Education in Malaysia under Malaysian Ethnic Politics. *Journal of Politics and Law*, *11*(2), 23.
[108] Collins, A. (2006). Chinese Educationalists in Malaysia: Defenders of Chinese Identity. *Asian Survey*, *46*(2), 298–318.

community as a threat to their culture[109] and therefore by extension a threat to China's quest to influence Malaysia through its Soft Power policy.

Finally, the development of Chinese universities as the last stage of education in Malaysia has also seen setbacks and difficulties. With the Malay government's adoption of ethnically based education, language and cultural policies with a view to integrate various ethnic groups under the dominant Malay culture, the creation of a Chinese University was doomed to failure. At the tertiary level, public universities teach in Bahasa Malaysia and private universities teach in English. What is more, the government created two universities that had established quotas for non-Malay students which further hindered their access to higher education[110]. There exist, however, three private Chinese colleges which use Mandarin as teaching medium[111]. While the Malay government is working towards increasingly limiting the presence and scope of Chinese schools, the Chinese community have been fighting back in order to maintain their cultural boundaries[112].

Recent shift in acceptance: Chinese culture reintegrates Malaysian identity, a welcome evolution to continue extending the BRI

For the first 25 years after the proclamation of Malaysia's independence, policies and institutions served to limit significant Chinese cultural transmission nationally. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s the government's attitude has shifted somewhat[113]. The then Mahathir-led government began to show more flexibility and lenience towards the non-Malay communities, more specifically the Chinese, in terms of their language, education, religion, and cultural heritage[114]. Some believe that this change in approach was spurred by the realisation that most of the Chinese community had chosen to abstain from national

[109] Ibid.
[110] Thock, K. P., & Tan, Y. S. (2014). Identity and Cultural Contestation in a Plural Society: The Development of Chinese Education in Malaysia. *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture*, *2*(1), 156–175.
[111] Collins, A. (2006). Chinese Educationalists in Malaysia: Defenders of Chinese Identity. *Asian Survey*, *46*(2), 298–318.
[112] Freeman, A. L. (2001). The Effect of Government Policy and Institutions on Chinese Overseas Acculturation: The Case of Malaysia. *Modern Asian Studies*, *35*(2), 411–440.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Thock, K. P., & Tan, Y. S. (2014). Identity and Cultural Contestation in a Plural Society: The Development of Chinese Education in Malaysia. *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture*, *2*(1), 156–175.

politics[115]. By accommodating the Chinese through the opening of a Chinese language department at a Malay College, the setting up of Chinese community-funded colleges like New Era College and Han Chiang College, as well as the signature of the Memorandum-of-Understanding (MoU) on Education Cooperation in 1997 between Malaysia and China, Malaysia hoped that the opportunities for the development of the Chinese educational system would incite members of that community to vote in the 1990 general election[116]. Additionally, a feeling of security in their pre-eminence and the ongoing subordination of non-Malay languages and cultures to Bahasa helped the Malay majority agree to giving the Chinese more cultural space within the public sphere[117]. Therefore, there has been a growing awareness and acceptance of the Chinese culture nationally as the Chinese community has begun to take part in globalisation. The Chinese have regained more spaces for their cultural symbols and practices in Malaysia which then led to the possibility of a revival of their traditions. This was achieved through a newly created identity which combined both traditional Chinese culture and the local culture they had assimilated over the past few decades[118]. Young educated Chinese for example have started to use technology and media to represent the Chinese culture that combines traditional Chinese myths with modern myths. The possibility of creating institutions using a vernacular language such as Mandarin as a medium of instruction has evidently been a means to preserve non-Malay culture and identity.

Once the Malaysian government changed its policies regarding the acceptance of Chinese culture nationally through granting them the possibility of developing their education system, the Chinese community saw their cultural practices integrate the national culture. Most notably, they saw the Chinese language and education system gain in popularity amongst both the Chinese and the ethnic Malays[119]. Surveys have reported that alongside a recent peak in enrolment, over 10 percent of students studying in Chinese schools came

[115] Milne, R. S., & Mauzy, D. K. (1999). *Malaysian Politics Under Mahathir (Politics in Asia)* (1st ed.). Routledge.
[116] Xia, N., Yang, Y., & Lee, Y. F. (2018). Chinese Education in Malaysia under Malaysian Ethnic Politics. *Journal of Politics and Law*, *11*(2), 23.
[117] Matondang, S. A. (2016). The Revival of Chineseness as a Cultural Identity in Malaysia. *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *19*(4), 56–70.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Kuek, F. (2015, January). *Chinese Education in Malaysia: A Reflection of Its Past & Future Direction* [Lectures Mandarin]. Universiti Teknologi Mara, Shah Alam, Malaysia.

from non-Chinese families, and this statistic has been increasing year on year[120]. This is due to multiple factors including the high level of commitment from Chinese teachers, the high marks received by students from Chinese schools at public examinations, and the added skill of learning Mandarin in a world where China is currently one of the leading world powers. Furthermore, Chinese associations have engaged in conversations with the government in order for Malaysia to recognise Chinese customs and practices as legitimate components of the Malaysian national identity[121] and thus integrate the "Chinese transnational cosmopolitan identity"[122]. Thus, by accepting the Chinese culture and letting it enmesh itself somewhat to the Malay identity, the government's goal of promoting a cohesive national identity by reaching a middle ground[123] was accomplished. Although Malaysia is not currently practicing the concept of uniformity that other countries follow, namely the "One Language, One Nation, One Country" ideal[124], the country is starting to celebrate its diversity and work towards the end of a segregated education system[125].

What with the increasingly positive relations with both the Chinese Malaysians and China through the signing of the Education MoU in 1997, allowing China's Soft Power influence to spread, the relationship between both nations became friendly. Indeed, when Malaysia went into economic recession after the 1997 financial crisis, it turned to China for help as the Chinese Outward Foreign Direct Investment (COFDI) became increasingly attractive. China and Malaysia signed a joint statement on the Framework for Future Bilateral Cooperation. From then on started a cooperation whereby China, using its increasingly positive standing spread through Soft Power education, culture and language policies, would promote its BRI expansion strategy in a country where infrastructure construction

120 Ibid.
121 Carstens, S. A. (2003). Constructing transnational identities? Mass media and the Malaysian Chinese audience. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *26*(2), 321–344.
122 Matondang, S. A. (2016). The Revival of Chineseness as a Cultural Identity in Malaysia. *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *19*(4), 56–70.
123 Segawa, N. (2019). *National Identity, Language and Education in Malaysia: Search for a Middle Ground between Malay Hegemony and Equality (Asia's Transformations)* (1st ed.). Routledge.
124 Abdullah, M., Liaw, O., & Husin, W. (2012). 1Malaysia: National Education Challenge and Nation Building. *International Journal of Social, Management, Economics and Business Engineering, World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology*, *6*(10), 423–432.
125 Murray, D. P. (1964). Chinese Education in South-East Asia. *The China Quarterly*, *20*, 67–95.

was in high demand[126]. This led to Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak's announcement in 2015 that he was willing to support the BRI, start cooperation on railway projects as soon as possible, expand financial cooperation and welcome Chinese enterprises to invest in Malaysia[127]. China quickly became Malaysia's largest investor, investing over $5 billion by 2017, accounting for 24.5 per cent of the foreign direct investment (FDI) attracted by Malaysia[128]. Both nations issued a joint press statement outlining the importance of the cooperation regarding the advancement of infrastructure in Malaysia. One of the points that was highlighted was the railway projects in southern Malaysia that includes transferral of technologies, the development of human resources, local procurement and other infrastructure industries. The expansion of the BRI was beneficial in the eyes of the then Malaysian government as it ignited rail and port construction including the East Coast Rail Lines (ECRL) to develop Malaysia's east coast regions, a port network, industrial parks, and other new forms of economic projects such as a digital free trade zone and the setting up of regional headquarters by Chinese megacorporations in Malaysia[129]. These would bring new business and job opportunities locally but equally beneficial, if not more, for China. Malaysia was the focus of Beijing's BRI strategy as the country's location remains pivotal in exerting influence over both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Malaysia's position as the third-largest economy in ASEAN was equally an incentive to be able to tap into an economic system that was compatible with China's long-term BRI plan [130]. These aspects made of Malaysia a crucial hub for China in order for the country to connect with Southeast, South and Western Asian countries and access the Strait of Malacca, one of the busiest shipping lines around the world.

However enthusiastic Prime Minister Razak was to let the BRI into Malaysia, the new government under Mahathir Mohamad remains more sceptical and is increasingly turning down or halting Chinese investment projects. Under Razak, most Chinese projects

[126] Zhang, X., Song, W., & Peng, L. (2020). Investment by Chinese Enterprise in Infrastructure Construction in Malaysia. *Pacific Focus: Inha Journal of International Studies*, 35(1), 109–140.
[127] Gui. (2015). *Li Keqiang held talks with Malaysian Prime Minister Najib*. Xinhuanet.
[128] Zhang, X., Song, W., & Peng, L. (2020). Investment by Chinese Enterprise in Infrastructure Construction in Malaysia. *Pacific Focus: Inha Journal of International Studies*, 35(1), 109–140.
[129] Kuik C. C. (2017). A Tempting Torch? Malaysia Embraces (and Leverages on) BRI Despite Domestic Discontent. In Praxis: A Review of Policy Practice. *Asian Politics and Policy*, 9(4), 652-654.
[130] Tuan, Y. K. (2017). Belt and Road Initiative: A New Impetus to Strengthen China-Malaysia Relations. *East Asian Policy*, *9*(2), 5–14.

were negotiated in closed-door meetings with minimal scrutiny which led to allegations being made whereby the TSGP oil and gas pipeline connecting Borneo to peninsular Malaysia as well as the MPP Malacca – Johor pipeline was used as vehicles to cover impending debt payments for the 1MDB, Malaysia's strategic development fund[131]. The Mohamad government has promised to stay transparent and cautious when dealing with BRI projects going forward. Indeed, when the new PM was elected, he stated that "Chinese investors had robbed the jobs of local people" and "Malaysia had not made any profit from Chinese investment[132]". He then went on to suspend the Chinese-backed ECRL and a few gas pipeline projects, the reason being that Malaysia's debt pressure was too high to pay for the projects. Although the ECRL was then restored after negotiations regarding price reductions, the pipelines remain on hold. Therefore, although Malaysia presents an overall positive and welcoming stance regarding China's FDIs and BRI projects, there exists an increasing domestic dissent towards China's presence in the country[133]. With an increasing number of Chinese foreign workers and expatriates arriving in Malaysia, they are overwhelmingly present in construction and services and relatively less so in manufacturing and agriculture, and there is a significant crowding out of local Small and Medium-sized enterprises (SME)[134]. This has led to a fear that China will soon control the entire supply chain in outbound investments and simultaneously price out local SMEs. This growing domestic criticism and pressure has resulted in politicians to speak out and describe China's investments in Malaysia as "too much, too fast, too soon[135]".

CONCLUSION

China's Soft Power influence over ASEAN nations through the means of culture, education and language has had, evidently, different levels of acceptance. Based on the degree of Overseas Chinese enmeshment in local society and the uptake of their culture, language and education system by the host country, Chinese FDI and BRI projects have been able

[131] Tritto, A. (2019). *The Belt and Road Initiative as a Catalyst for Institutional Development: Evidence from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar* (No. 30). HKUST IEMS Thought Leadership Briefs.
[132] Zhang, X., Song, W., & Peng, L. (2020). Investment by Chinese Entreprise in Infrastructure Construction in Malaysia. *Pacific Focus: Inha Journal of International Studies*, 35(1), 109–140.
[133] Yean, T. (2018). *Chinese Investment in Malaysia: Five Years into the BRI* (No. 11). Perspectives - ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Kuik C. C. (2017). A Tempting Torch? Malaysia Embraces (and Leverages on) BRI Despite Domestic Discontent. In Praxis: A Review of Policy Practice. *Asian Politics and Policy*, 9(4), 652-654.

to fray themselves a path. Cambodia, who has vastly assimilated Chinese culture into their own, was extremely enthusiastic at the prospect of BRI implementation on the ground. China found it therefore straight forward and relatively simple to exert its Soft Power influence over that nation and become Cambodia's main global power to turn to. Malaysia, on the other hand, has been more sceptical and has trodden around the Malaysian-Chinese relations with more caution. As part of Malaysia's wish to achieve a unified nation, China's influence and primacy were not immediately accepted nor invited. It has taken China longer to be present in Malaysia and still to this day is not completely entrusted; its influence is still contested. China has needed to use different tactics in order to achieve its goal of becoming a regional hegemon through Soft Power strategies in Southeast Asia.

Although Beijing's quest to become regional hegemon has had heterogenous results, it is undeniable that since the start of its "good neighbour" strategy implementation, China's influence has skyrocketed. Its Soft Power strategy has had an effect on both countries we have studied and the BRI has been successfully implemented. Cambodia and Malaysia, along with many other ASEAN countries, have now signed agreements to participate in the building of Beijing's intricate geostrategic network. By 2050, it is highly possible that the international community will experience a shift in dominating powers from the United States to China if the latter continues to implement its current strategies[136]. But will this transition be peaceful? Challenges have arisen across the region, even within those countries which are closely aligned with China. Major powers are not ready to back down or lose their own sphere of influence within the region and the South China Sea issue is causing a spike in tensions. These factors cannot be overlooked as they are likely to contribute to a possible clash between China, ASEAN states and other powers invested in the area. Thirty years ago, very few would have predicted the current state of geopolitics, therefore, we have to be prudent when forecasting what will the situation be in 2050. ■

[136] Riga, D. (2019). Les Nouvelles routes de la soie : Projet sino-centré ou projet d'hégémonie ? *Asia Focus*, *121*, 1–22.

ASIA FOCUS #151

CHINA'S USE OF SOFT POWER THROUGH CULTURE: LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA AND MALAYSIA

By MAÏA RAMZAN/ Graduated from IRIS SUP' in Humanitarian Management

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