Maria Serena I. Diokno, Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao and Alan H. Yang
(eds), *China's Footprints in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2019, 249 pp.
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The study of China-Southeast Asian interactions has so far focused mainly on the issues of political economy, strategy and security, and migration and ethnic Chinese in the region. Hence, the literature has mostly been on the history of bilateral relationship such as the tributary system, maritime trade, and Chinese migration on the one hand, and the political economy of multi-lateral relationships such as China-ASEAN trade and investments, the South China Sea, and the Belt and Road Initiative on the other.

The period of the Cold War when China was disconnected from ASEAN and the fact that there was the powerful presence in the region of great Western powers have no doubt shaped the understanding of China-Southeast Asian relationship. Yet, over the past few decades, after the Cold War, structural changes, both in China and in the China-Southeast Asian relationship, have taken place. The rise of China and the “China threat” along with the emergence of ASEAN as the fifth-largest economy in the world and China’s second-largest trade partner provide a larger context for the academic discourse on China’s footprints in the region.

Within the framework of global power politics, the asymmetric relationship between China and Southeast Asia due to its size, population, economic and military power, the unease of China as a perceived threat and the politics of hegemony and dependence loom over the region. On the other hand, there are the “soft footprints” and soft power discourse that emphasize a better understanding between the two regions and the importance of people-to-people relations and of educational and cultural exchanges.

In the context of transformations in the global power balance and of Sino-SEA historical relations, *China's Footprints in Southeast Asia* focuses on China’s soft footprints. This focus is relevant to the current momentum of China’s presence in the region and represents another significant aspect of China-Southeast Asian interaction.

The book under review offers a political economy approach to a very significant area of contemporary China-SEA interactions. It includes a Taiwan dimension, which has so far been neglected even in Mainland Chinese and Southeast Asian scholarship. There is a need to understand Taiwan’s important role and this perspective deserves scholarly attention as an integral part for the study of China-Southeast Asian interactions.

Michael Hsiao has provided dynamic leadership in promoting contemporary Southeast Asian Studies in Taiwan since the late 1990s, despite the “South

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Forward” ideological agenda behind it. The book is a welcome scholarly contribution to the literature in English, especially in cooperation with scholars from Southeast Asia. It provides interesting, if not unique, Taiwanese and Southeast Asian perspectives and interpretations to the English world. There remains, however, an unfortunate absence of scholarship both from Mainland China and from the West. The book is a selection of papers presented to a workshop organized in Taiwan in 2014.

Two related concepts of soft power and soft footprints form the book’s framework. In applying Nye’s concept of the soft power, the book has developed its own notion of a soft footprint. In other words, the concept “footprint” is used to conceptualize “soft power on the ground.” Soft power refers to the non-hard, non-coercive, and non-material capacity to appeal, such as culture, political values and foreign policy. Footprint is “the effect of soft power” and “loosely defined as the tangible presence, mark, or effect of China’s exercise of soft power in the region. Aside from foreign policy, other footprints of China discussed in this book are trade, foreign aid, and cultural programs in Southeast Asia” (p. 16). Various Chinese footprints have been identified. The book is organized according to four areas: soft footprints as a thematic introduction; soft footprints in China’s foreign policy; visible footprints in China’s bilateral cooperation projects in Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines; and cultural footprints in Southeast Asia in general and in Indonesia in particular. The book addresses “not only the kinds of imprints China has made in various Southeast Asian countries but the manner in which they produced them with bilateral partner states and, on the part of the latter, the spaces Southeast Asian partners created or negotiated in order to respond to or, in some cases, even challenge, China’s soft power” (p. 16).

The book consists of eight chapters, including Chapter One by the editors that serves as an introduction to China’s soft footprints in Southeast Asia. The other chapters offer a case study of China’s foreign policy (Teng-Chi Chang), Sino-Myanmar economic relations particularly on the Myitsone Dam and Letpadaung copper mine projects (Ian Tsung-yen Chen), China’s economic presence in Malaysia and particularly the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (Ngeow Chow Bing), China-Indonesia cooperation in the Fast Track Program I (Natalia Soebago), China’s aid diplomacy in the Philippines (Dennis D. Trinidad), the re-recognition of Confucianism in Indonesia (Yumi Kitamura), and Confucius Institutes in Southeast Asia (Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao and Alan H. Yang). Chapter Eight, while serving as an empirical case study like the previous chapters, also neatly wraps up the overall study with a conclusion.

This is an important book on soft footprint in Southeast Asia that goes beyond the conventional security and strategic studies approach to China-Southeast Asian interactions. It is argued that China’s footprints in Southeast

Asia are shaped by the circumstances not only of the outside world's view of China as a threat but also China's own approach towards a "harmonious world," "good neighborhood," and "going-out" policy, as well Southeast Asian countries' own interests as defined by their history and contemporary politics. Mutual engagements have been the dynamics behind China's soft footprint in Southeast Asia. While "China will continue to deboss its soft footprint in the region more deeply and more extensively" (p. 23), it is suggested that there is still a long way to go, and it is not a one-way or one-sided China traffic, but a trend involving two-way better understanding, accommodation, and contestation.

Nevertheless, the two core concepts of the footprint and soft power should be further scrutinized, especially as to how each is related to and at the same time distinguishable from the other. It would also be more solid if such conceptual correlations and distinctions could be firmly grounded in the framework of China's historical experience in dealing with great powers from outside the region. These two significant dimensions of the power relationship would provide a wider context of a changing dynamics that could enrich our understanding of China's footprints in Southeast Asia. History not only includes the peaceful Zhenghe Voyage and the maritime silk route, but also the centuries-long colonial conquests, nation-building, and the Cold War in Southeast Asia. That is also an appealing historical rationale behind China's footprints and the Belt and Road Initiative. Put another way, for the discussion of a soft footprint and soft power, especially regarding cultural and educational exchanges, the scholars of history and (sociocultural) anthropology could add value to scholarly research in political science and international relations.

The editors have sought to maintain scholarly objectivity and to offer a volume to the international scholarly community. Nevertheless, a number of questions need to be raised here. The book reflects a largely Taiwanese perspective and there is an absence of presentations from Mainland China and the West. Furthermore, the volume has not adequately covered other Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, and Brunei. Finally, there should have been a chapter on the history of China's footprints that would have provided a framework and better understanding of continuity and change in contemporary China's footprints in Southeast Asia. More importantly, while the concept of soft power is not a new idea, there is a need to clarify in this book how this has turned out to be a "soft footprint" with its own distinct characteristics. Nevertheless, the book should be of interest to scholars in the various areas of China-Southeast Asian interactions.

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