

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

**Singapore** | 25 April 2022

---

## Cambodian Perception of the New Chinese

*Vannarith Chheang\**



*Members of a lion dance troupe perform in Phnom Penh ahead of the Lunar New Year. Picture: TANG CHHIN Sothy, AFP.*

*\*The author is Visiting Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute and President of the Asian Vision Institute (AVI), an independent think tank based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.*

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The New Chinese of Cambodia—Chinese migrants who arrived in the country after the 1990s—reinforce the existing politico-economic order characterized by the dominant economic role of the ethnic Chinese.
- A preliminary online survey of 100 respondents was conducted in February 2022 to understand public perception of the New Chinese in Cambodia. The findings show that Cambodians generally perceive the New Chinese positively (52 out of 100 responses). The survey is a pilot study and does not claim to be conclusive, and further surveys should be conducted in the future.
- The New Chinese are perceived to have significant political and economic influence over the politico-economic establishment. Remarkably, 64 per cent of respondents perceive the New Chinese as having strong economic influence and 17 per cent rate it as very high. In terms of political influence, 38 per cent rate it as high and 15 per cent rate it as very high.
- The social tension between Cambodians and the New Chinese is rated high (45 per cent) and very high (14 per cent). This is mainly due to a lack of mutual understanding and respect, language barrier and miscommunication, and the bad behaviour of some New Chinese.

## **INTRODUCTION**

China is Cambodia's top economic partner and donor. Cambodia's economic overdependence on China, and the power asymmetry between the two countries, have enabled China to exert vital political leverage over the Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> The influx of New Chinese migrants to the Kingdom has further enhanced China's socio-economic and political presence in Cambodia. In addition to migrant socio-economic networks, it is the close political and economic relations between the two countries which have contributed to the inflow of New Chinese migrants.

The New Chinese, referring to Chinese migrants who arrived and settled in Cambodia after the 1990s (after peace in Cambodia was restored), is an emerging socio-economic force in Cambodia. The main occupations of the New Chinese include petty traders, service entrepreneurs, skilled garment workers, and white-collar workers in the construction, engineering, financial services, law, media, journalism, and education sectors.<sup>2</sup>

There are some news reports about Cambodian reactions to the New Chinese, but no academic study has ever been undertaken on Cambodian perception of the New Chinese. This paper attempts to shed light on the matter by conducting an online survey among residents of Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia. These respondents were from a variety of sectors; but with only 100 responses received, the survey should be treated as a pilot study.

## **BACKGROUND**

Historically, extensive Chinese settlement in Cambodia began in the fifteenth century, which brought a marked change to the nature of the local economy. After 1400, the Cambodian economy depended more on trade, mainly contributed by the Chinese migrants who gradually formed an entrepreneurial class and an ethnic minority community. The marketplace became the meeting point for different ethnicities, as economic relations predominated over other aspects of life. The Chinese were in control of almost all internal trade and a substantial portion of the manufacturing sector, including rice-milling and transportation, which were so vital to the Cambodian economy.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1990s, Chinese business migrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong and the ASEAN countries played a major role in Cambodia's economy. Since 2010, migrants from mainland China have come to dominate the Chinese community. Whereas the earlier migrants in the 1900's were from Fujian, these new migrants are mostly from Zhejiang, Sichuan, Hunan and Guangxi, followed by Guangdong, the Northeast (Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang), Hubei, Henan, Chongqing, Shanghai, Yunnan, Beijing and Fujian. . There is no official record on the number of New Chinese migrants from mainland China, but it is estimated to be around 150,000.<sup>4</sup>

The New Chinese normally have no regional, dialect or occupational identity. Still, their common origins in either mainland China, Taiwan or Hong Kong, and their knowledge of Mandarin or Cantonese are quite distinct from that of the earlier Chinese.<sup>5</sup>

These migrants are endowed with commercial acumen and entrepreneurial spirit that enable them to adapt to the host society. Most Chinese immigrants initially went to Cambodia on job assignments before deciding to stay and seek new opportunities there. The jobs that brought them were usually related to state-owned enterprises, sub-contractors, textile factories, and Chinese-language schools.<sup>6</sup>

Generally, the new Chinese migrants are more mobile, and possess higher education, specialized skills, and capital than the earlier Chinese. However, tensions between the new migrants and the locals increased due to ethnicity being politicized especially after China implemented a policy called ‘return to original roots.’<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, daily social interactions created a multifaceted Chineseness among various Chinese sub-ethnic groups (Sino-Khmer, Mainland Chinese, and Taiwanese). These groups adapt to different social statuses to ‘fit in, adapt, adjust, assimilate, reject, or resist’ within the diversified social organizations and networks, and socio-political structure. Shihlun Allen Chen argues that Chineseness is a socio-political process.<sup>8</sup> The formalization and legalization of the Chinese networks with the support of political and economic institutions contribute to expanding business opportunities and personal connections. Being part of these networks helps develop social capital and political protection.<sup>9</sup>

The New Chinese are protected by different networks. Personal relationship formed with government officials, patron–client relations, rent-seeking and crony capitalism are common strategies for their survival and social mobility.<sup>10</sup> As a result, they have underpinned Cambodia’s established politico-economic order signified by the economic dominance of ethnic Chinese, the patronage system, and the disparity between the elites and the general population.<sup>11</sup>

The New Chinese in Cambodia embody slightly different cultural characteristics. They are less integrated into Khmer society than the Old Chinese, whose cultural identity integrated well with Khmer culture thanks to inter-ethnic marriages and the fusion of cultural traditions and norms. The New Chinese prefer to live within their community, without many interactions with Cambodians. Noticeably, the influx of New Chinese in the 2010s—mainly driven by growing investment and tourism—has caused a certain degree of anti-Chinese sentiment among Cambodians due to increased crime rates and the bad behaviour of some Chinese.<sup>12</sup>

Some local Cambodians are not happy with the New Chinese because the economic benefits are not widely shared.<sup>13</sup> Some local analysts have raised concerns over the loss of

Cambodian identity<sup>14</sup> and socio-economic issues such as rising inflation, land conflicts, and limited benefits to local people.<sup>15</sup>

## **SURVEY FINDINGS**

A random online survey was conducted in February 2022 among residents working and residing in Phnom Penh. The snowballing approach was used to approach potential respondents. As a result, 100 responses were received. The survey comprised of 14 questions, which took approximately 5 minutes to complete. This is a preliminary research project with the aim to set some hypotheses for future research with larger sample and more sophisticated research methodology.

### *Profile of Respondents*

The profile of the respondents is as follows: 59 per cent are male, and 41 per cent female. In terms of age distribution, 42.9 per cent are between 20 and 30 years old, 32.7 per cent are between 30 and 40, and 24.5 per cent are above 40. Regarding the level of education, 52 per cent have an undergraduate degree, 41 per cent have a post-graduate degree, and 7 per cent completed high school. In terms of affiliation, 47 per cent are from the private sector, 29 per cent are from the public sector, 18 per cent from civil society, and the remaining 6 per cent are self-employed.

In terms of occupations of the New Chinese, 48 per cent of the respondents run their own business, 29 per cent are employed in the private sector, and 20 per cent are self-employed. The survey findings reinforce the general perception that the New Chinese play a dominant economic role in Cambodia.

### *General Perceptions of the New Chinese*

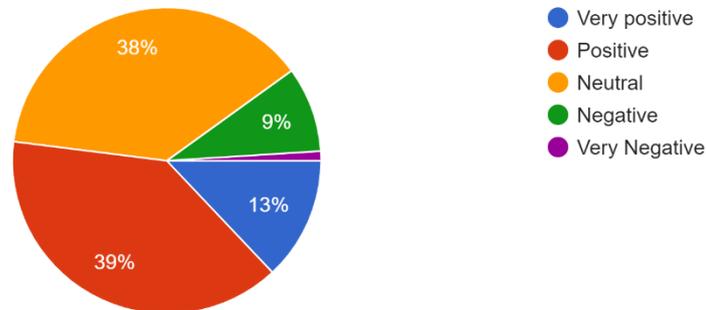
The New Chinese are widely positively perceived by the respondents. Remarkably, 39 per cent have a positive view of the New Chinese and 13 per cent have a very positive view. A neutral view of the New Chinese accounts for 38%, and 10 per cent hold an unfavourable view. Such an overwhelming positive perception is perhaps also influenced by the support of China helping Cambodia fight against the Covid-19 pandemic and China's increasing economic and political influence over Phnom Penh.<sup>16</sup>

More than 90 per cent of the Cambodian respondents perceive that China is the most crucial support in providing vaccines to the region, and about 68 per cent trust Chinese vaccines (Sinopharm, Sinovac). China is widely perceived as the most influential economic power in the region (84 per cent) and most influential political and strategic power in the region (75.3 per cent).<sup>17</sup>

Figure 1: Perception of the New Chinese

Perception of the New Chinese

100 responses



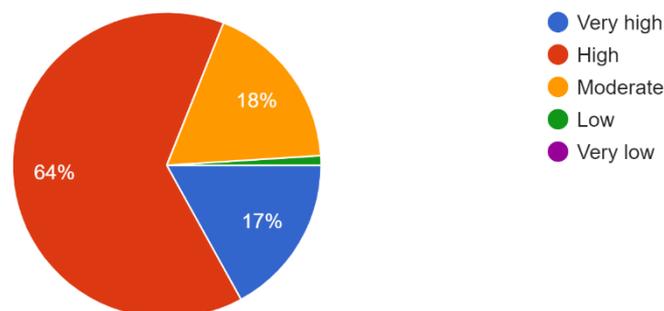
*Economic and Political Influence*

As much as 64 per cent perceive the new Chinese to have strong economic influence and 17 per cent rate it very high. The New Chinese are considered entrepreneurial and highly involved in economic activities such as trading and investment. The flow of Chinese investment capital and tourists into Cambodia creates vast business opportunities for the New Chinese.

Figure 2: Economic influence of the New Chinese

Economic influence of the New Chinese

100 responses

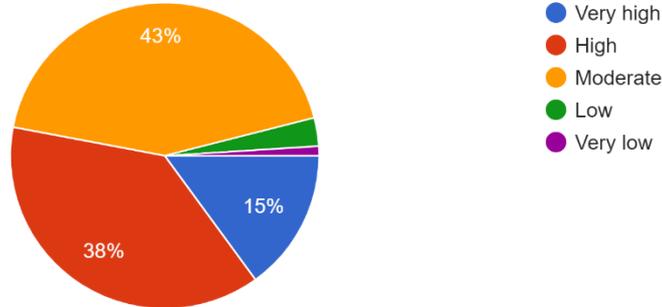


In terms of political influence, the New Chinese are seen to have significant influence, with 38 per cent rating it high and 15 per cent very high, while 43 per cent rate it to be moderate. The political influence stems from the complex patronage networks between political leaders and business elites.

Figure 3: Political influence of the New Chinese

Political influence of the New Chinese

100 responses



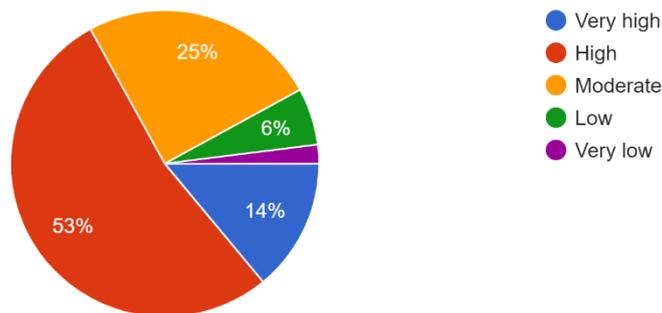
*Economic Contributions*

The economic contributions of the New Chinese are rated high (53 per cent), very high (14 per cent), moderate (25 per cent), low (6 per cent), and very low (2 per cent). Clearly, the New Chinese are a fundamental economic actor in Cambodia, with some of them functioning as a bridge to connect Cambodia and China by attracting Chinese investors, tourists and donors, establishing companies that create job opportunities and incomes for the local people, and sharing entrepreneurship knowledge and skills.

Figure 4: Economic contributions of the New Chinese

Economic contributions of the New Chinese

100 responses



Some local Cambodian entrepreneurs and job seekers feel that they cannot compete with the New Chinese. Other issues relate to inflation (perceived to be partially caused by the

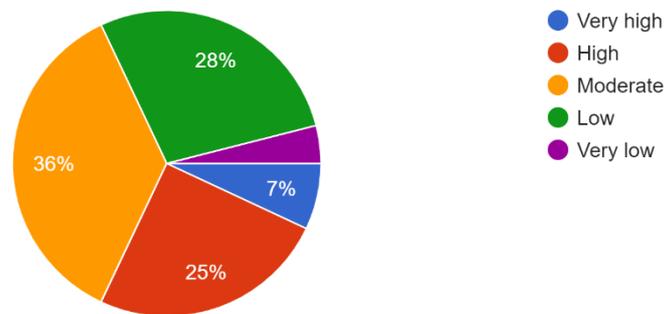
New Chinese) and economic crime include money laundering, trafficking, and online gambling.

*Social Integration*

Although the New Chinese have gained significant influence in Cambodia’s economic and political activities, social integration remains a key issue and challenge. The survey findings illustrate that the level of social integration of the New Chinese is relatively low compared with other perception indicators: 28 per cent rate it to be low, 36 per cent rate it moderate, 25 per cent rate it high, 7 per cent rate it very high, and 4 per cent rate it to be very low.

Figure 5: Level of social integration of the New Chinese

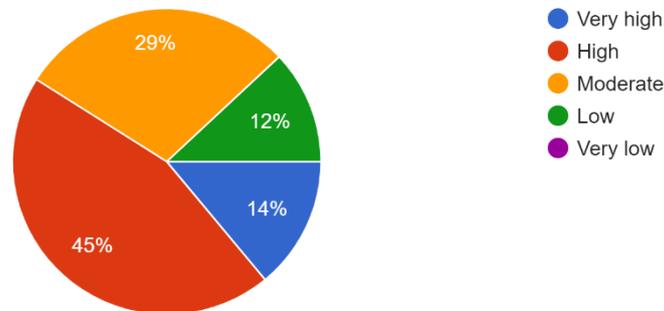
Level of social integration of the New Chinese  
100 responses



Social tension between Cambodians and the New Chinese is high (45 per cent) and very high (14 per cent) mainly due to the lack of mutual understanding and respect, language barrier and miscommunication, and the bad behaviour of some New Chinese. Noticeably, the New Chinese, especially those who have arrived in Cambodia after 2010, tend to live within their own circles or community, and have little interactions with the locals. Moreover, the use of the Chinese language on the signboards of businesses owned and/or managed by New Chinese, and in some cases, the erroneous usage of Khmer words on signboards stir up public resentment.

Figure 6: Social tension between the New Chinese and local Cambodians

Social tensions between the New Chinese and local Cambodians  
100 responses



The public has negative views about Chinese involvement in the casino economy. For instance, Chinese gangsters and mafia in Sihanoukville are involved in online scams and human and drug trafficking. These crimes lead to the deterioration of public security and rising negative sentiments towards the New Chinese.<sup>18</sup>

To improve social integration, the respondents suggested that the New Chinese respect local laws and norms (46 per cent), learn the Khmer language (24 per cent), respect local culture and traditions (19 per cent), and live together with Cambodians (10 per cent). Promoting social and cultural exchanges between Cambodians and New Chinese, especially those who arrived in Cambodia after 2010, is critical to reducing social tensions and enhancing social integration.

It is further suggested that the local authorities should enhance the rule of law, good governance (transparency and accountability), raise public awareness among the New Chinese on Cambodian culture and traditions, promote mutual respect and tolerance, and control cross-border crimes. In addition, the companies run by the New Chinese should adhere to social and environmental safeguard measures.

## CONCLUSION

The New Chinese who have worked, done business, and settled down in Cambodia since 1990s have significantly contributed to the socio-economic development of Cambodia as well as underpinned the established politico-economic order characterized by the economic dominance of ethnic Chinese and the disparity between the elites and the grassroots.

The findings of this preliminary research illustrate that the public perception of the New Chinese in Cambodia is generally positive, although there are some social tensions and anti-Chinese sentiments. The New Chinese are the dominant economic actor mainly involved in trading, services, and manufacturing, and are a critical force shaping Cambodia's politico-economic order.

The main issue for the New Chinese is social integration as they are already strongly immersed into the Cambodian economy. Language barriers and misunderstanding, lack of mutual respect, and lack of knowledge of local culture and norms are the key issues that need to be addressed. Social tension is expected to rise unless policy interventions are introduced.

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Chheang, Vannarith (2019) The political economy of Chinese investment in Cambodia. Trends in Southeast Asia No.16. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Pal, Nyiri (2014) New Chinese migration and capital in Cambodia. Trends in Southeast Asia No. 3. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

<sup>3</sup> Willmott, William (1967) The Chinese in Cambodia. Vancouver: University of British Columbia.

<sup>4</sup> Chin, James (2017) "Ethnicise networks and local embeddedness: The new Chinese migrant community in Cambodia" in Min Zhou (ed., pp. 187-206) Contemporary Chinese diasporas. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>5</sup> Chin, James (2017) "Ethnicise networks and local embeddedness: The new Chinese migrant community in Cambodia" in Min Zhou (ed., pp. 187-206) Contemporary Chinese diasporas. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>6</sup> Shihlun Allen Chen (2018) Social spacing, organizational development and network utility of Chinese business organisations in Cambodia. International Journal of Anthropology, 8:11, 12-24.

<sup>7</sup> Leo, Suryadinata (2021) A rising China affects ethnic identities in Southeast Asia. ISEAS Perspective No. 74, Issue 2021. [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2021\\_74.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_74.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Shihlun Allen Chen (2015) Socialising Chineseness: Cambodia's ethnic Chinese communities as a method. A dissertation submitted to the University of Hawaii at Manoa. [https://www.academia.edu/13313902/SOCIALIZING\\_CHINESENESS\\_CAMBODIA\\_S\\_ETHNIC\\_CHINESE\\_COMMUNITIES\\_AS\\_A\\_METHOD](https://www.academia.edu/13313902/SOCIALIZING_CHINESENESS_CAMBODIA_S_ETHNIC_CHINESE_COMMUNITIES_AS_A_METHOD)

<sup>9</sup> Shihlun Allen Chen (2018) Social spacing, organizational development and network utility of Chinese business organisations in Cambodia. International Journal of Anthropology, 8:11, 12-24.

<sup>10</sup> Chin, James (2017) "Ethnicise networks and local embeddedness: The new Chinese migrant community in Cambodia" in Min Zhou (ed., pp. 187-206) Contemporary Chinese diasporas. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>11</sup> Verver, Michiel (2019) 'Old' and 'New' Chinese business in Cambodia's capital. Trends in Southeast Asia No. 17. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, Goerge (2018) "Anti-Chinese sentiment on the rise in Cambodia". The Diplomat, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/anti-chinese-sentiment-on-the-rise-in-cambodia/>

<sup>13</sup> “How Chinese money is changing Cambodia”, Deutsche Welle (DW), 22 August 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-chinese-money-is-changing-cambodia/a-50130240>

<sup>14</sup> Sim Vireak (2019) Sihanoukville: A Cambodian city losing its ‘Cambodian-ness’, The Diplomat, April 20, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/sihanoukville-a-cambodian-city-losing-its-cambodian-ness/>

<sup>15</sup> Jing Luo and Kheang Un (2020) Cambodia: Hard landing for China’s soft power? ISEAS Perspective No. 11, Issue 2020, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2020\\_111.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_111.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Cambodia’s Hun Sen: “If I don’t rely on China, who will I rely on?”, Nikkei Asia, May 20, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Future-of-Asia/The-Future-of-Asia-2021/Cambodia-s-Hun-Sen-If-I-don-t-rely-on-China-who-will-I-rely-on>

<sup>17</sup> State of Southeast Asia Report 2022, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2022-survey-report/>

<sup>18</sup> Han, Enze (2021) Non-state Chinese actors and their impact on relations between China and mainland Southeast Asia. Trends in Southeast Asia, Issue 1, 2021. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

<p><i>ISEAS Perspective</i> is published electronically by: <b>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</b></p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS. Please click here: <a href="https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support/get-involved-with-iseas/">https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support/get-involved-with-iseas/</a></p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Editorial Committee: Terence Chong, Cassey Lee, Norshahril Saat, and Hoang Thi Ha.</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: William Choong, Lee Poh Onn, Lee Sue-Ann, and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
--	---	--