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Chinese Language Education in Southeast Asia: Towards Greater Significance

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Chinese migration to Southeast Asia (SEA) has a long history. Where the issue of Chinese education is concerned, it is analytically fruitful to separate the Contemporary Period stretching over the last three decades from the earlier Modern Period going back to the late 19th century.
- In the Contemporary Period, these schools have become localised to the individual states. A rising China has led to the proliferation of Confucius Institutes (CI) in the region. Aside from CIs, China has also begun to offer tertiary scholarships and collaborate with tertiary institutions in the region.
- These are largely welcomed in Southeast Asia, perhaps for two reasons. Firstly, the nation-building process has been largely successful and local states no longer perceive China as a serious threat as China has become more materialistic and less ideological. Secondly, the economic opportunities presented by a rising China have allowed for Chinese education to transcend beyond ethnicity concerns into economics and other profitable areas.
- Nevertheless, due to the earlier “nationalisation” of many Chinese schools in SEA, the standard of Chinese has declined among ethnic Chinese.
- While the reach of Chinese education – and thus, Chinese soft power – is growing in SEA, it is still limited. The growth of Chinese education is not without its challenges, with anti-Chinese rhetoric and the politicisation of China’s educational institutions being a deterrence to the uptake of the language.

INTRODUCTION

As China emerges as a world power, its soft power ambitions understandably extend to include Chinese education. This article examines the measures taken by Southeast Asian states to manage this development, and how these states, in modifying policies and attitudes on this front, have significantly affected the nature and significance of Chinese language education in the region.

Chinese migration to Southeast Asia (SEA) has a long history. Throughout this, the migrants had vehemently sought to preserve their language and culture. Education in their communities was therefore of vital importance to them. Before the rise of China as a world power in recent decades, Chinese education had often faced opposition from governments of the day, be they local or colonial. We term this as the Modern Period.

The measures undertaken differed from territory to territory, and from country to country, resulting in the emergence of different types of Chinese schools.

In the last three or four decades, however, as the influence of China grew, new processes can be identified which are different from those of the Modern era. This Contemporary Period, however, generated different political scenarios for the Southeast Asian states.

FROM MODERN TO CONTEMPORARY

The Modern Period

Chinese migrants in SEA had often organised themselves by clan and provincial associations generically called *Zongxiang Huiguan* (宗乡会馆, also called dialect group associations). These *Huiguan* were created to help new migrants survive and they would establish temples, funeral associations and Chinese schools. The last was of particular relevance in the twentieth century, when modern Chinese education began to flourish. Taking the cue from developments in China, colloquial Chinese, named *Bai Hua Wen* (白话文) was adopted in Chinese schools, and Classical Chinese *Wen Yan Wen* (文言文) faded from memory.

The majority of the Chinese migrants in SEA went to Chinese primary schools and, later on, to Chinese secondary schools once these were established. Those who graduated from the latter would seek tertiary education to China. Tan Kah Kee (陈嘉庚, 1874–1961), a wealthy businessmen and philanthropist specially built Chip Bee School (集美学校) in 1918 and Xiamen (Amoy) University in 1921, both in China, for overseas Chinese students to receive higher education.¹

In the mid-1950s, the first and only Chinese-medium university in SEA was established. This was Nanyang University (*Nanyang Daxue* or 南洋大学). Initiated by the Chinese business community led by Tan Lark Sye (陈六使, 1897–1972), leader of the Hokkien (*Fujian* or 福建) Association. Nanyang University (1955–1980) marked the furthest development of

Chinese education in SEA during the Modern Period. In the 25 years of its existence, it produced about 12,000 graduates, many of whom went on to serve as teachers in Chinese schools in Singapore and Malaysia, and beyond.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the division of Chinese schools in SEA into pro-Taipei and pro-Beijing schools became more pronounced.

As local nationalism in SEA grew, all these schools came to be considered a national security and/or nation-building problem. Indonesia would allow only the children of foreigners to study in Chinese schools at first, but by 1966, it put a stop to these schools altogether. States like Thailand and the Philippines restricted the operation of pure Chinese schools and limited the number of hours for the teaching of the Chinese language. Singapore transformed all Chinese schools into national schools, where Chinese is taught as a 'mother tongue' (or second language). In Malaysia, Chinese primary schools were changed to national-type schools under the national school system, but remained Chinese-medium schools. At the secondary school level, however, all national-type schools use Malay as the medium of instruction. The so-called independent schools (独立中学) largely retain Chinese as the medium of instruction.² Some of the major Chinese schools in the Modern Period are listed in Table 1.

The nationalisation or localisation of Chinese medium schools took place in many SEA countries in the last century, coinciding with their nation-building processes. A decline in the standard of the Chinese language in these countries was inevitable.

If we examine the Chinese language and Chinese education in the contemporary scene, one can see that all of the Southeast Asian states, with the exception of Malaysia and possibly Laos, have introduced a national education system in which either English or the national language has become the medium of instruction, and the Chinese language is taught as either the 'mother tongue' or second language. Where private schools run by ethnic Chinese are allowed (except in Malaysia and possibly Laos), they tend to function as "tuition schools" that supplement national schools rather than as full-fledged schools.

Table 1: Major Chinese High Schools in Southeast Asia

<i>School</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
Pah Cheng Tsung Hsueh 巴城中学 (巴中)	Jakarta, Indonesia	Pro-Beijing. Closed down in 1966; Revived in 1990 mainly a primary school.
Chung Hwa Chung Hsueh 中华中学 (华中)	Jakarta, Indonesia	Pro-Beijing, Closed down in 1966
Pa Hwa School 八华学校	Jakarta, Indonesia	Neutral in orientation. Closed in 1966; Revived in 1998 as trilingual school.
Hwa Chiao Chung Hsueh 华侨中学 (华中)	Singapore	Transformed into national-type school.
Chung Cheng Chung Hsueh 中正中学	Singapore	Transformed into national-type school.
Foon Yew High School 宽柔中学	Johor, Malaysia	Transformed into national-type school
Confucius School 尊孔中学	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Divided into national-type school and Private independent school
Chung Ling High School 钟 灵中学	Penang, Malaysia	Divided into national-type school and Private independent school
Tiong Se Academy 中西学院	Manila, the Philippines	Transformed into language school
Philippine Cultural College 菲律宾侨中学院	Manila, the Philippines	Transformed into language school
LiaoDu Zhongxue 寮都公学	Vientiane, Laos	Transformed into bilingual school
Duanhua Zhongxue 端华中学	Phnom Penh, Cambodia	Transformed into bilingual school.
Nanyang Zhongxue 南洋中学	Bangkok, Thailand	Closed in 1948. No genuine Chinese school has existed in Thailand since then.

The Contemporary Period

The Contemporary Period sees “Chinese schools” relying less on Beijing or Taipei for teaching materials. Instead, they are concerned with the national contents of the textbooks. Singapore and Malaysia, for instance, have developed Chinese-language textbooks reflecting their own national identity. The contents lean towards creating national identities rather than Chinese identities. According to some reports, Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese textbooks are used by private schools in other Southeast Asian countries, at least prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 2 illustrates the variety of Chinese schools that are now present in Southeast Asia. These schools are under government supervision and control but due to differing conditions, they possess different characteristics.

Table 2: Five Types of Chinese Schools

	<i>Category</i>	<i>Names of Schools</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
1	Full-fledged Chinese Schools	Known as Duli Zhongxue (独立中学) or independent schools in Malaysia; Also LiaoDu Gongxue (寮都公学) in Laos	Chinese is the main language used in these schools. But in LiaoDu, Lao and English are taught in the afternoon.
2	Half-day Chinese Schools	TuanHoa (<i>Duanhua</i>) Xuexiao (端华学校) in Phnom Penh (Cambodia)	Only half a day. Chinese is the main medium of instruction. Certificate not recognised by the government.
3	Tuition Schools	Most of the Chinese schools in Thailand and the Philippines	Supplementary schools attended by Chinese children after school hours.
4	National-type Schools	Three Languages Schools (三语学校, Indonesia); Also, Chinese primary schools in Malaysia that study three languages	In Indonesia, they are mainly Indonesian-language schools, but Chinese and English are taught. In Malaysia, national-type schools at the primary level still use Mandarin as medium of instruction, but within the national school system.
5	English Schools with Chinese as mother tongue	Almost all Chinese schools in Singapore; Chinese schools in Brunei Darussalam	English is used as the main language; mother-tongue (Chinese) is taught as a second language.

THE ENTRY OF CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES

Aside from the local Chinese schools which have grown to encompass different local characteristics, there is also an emerging trend of language export. This has to do with the Confucius Institutes (CI) from China. The organisation responsible for the spread of the Han language, or *Hanyu*, is called the Office of the Han Language, termed *Hanban* (汉办). *Hanban* is located in the Chinese Premier's Office and is tasked since 2005 with establishing CIs (*Kongzi Xueyuan*, 孔子学院) throughout the world. These CIs are usually established within foreign universities, with each CI paired with a university in China.

Since 2005, *Hanban* has set up 40 CIs in Southeast Asia, of which the largest number is in Thailand—16 altogether. Indonesia comes second with eight institutes. There are four established in the Philippines and the rest of the countries in SEA have only one or two each. There is no CI in Brunei Darussalam.³

These 40 CIs were established to teach the Chinese language to Southeast Asians, both ethnic Chinese and non-Chinese. At the same time, they aim to expose them to Chinese culture. According to some reports, many Southeast Asian government officials have been taking Chinese language lessons from CIs. The students at CIs are also given opportunities to further their studies in China.

CIIs offer courses in *Hanyu* rather than *Huayu*, except in Singapore, where both *Hanyu* and *Huayu* are taught in the Institute. The students are made fully aware that *Hanyu* is the language used in China, while the official name for the Chinese language in Singapore is *Huayu*. Additionally, CIIs offer scholarships for students to upgrade their *Hanyu* skills in China's universities. Each Confucius Institute only offers about 20 scholarships each year, and the number of applicants has always exceeded the quota, indicating the great interest that Southeast Asian students have in the Chinese language.⁴

There are two reasons attributed to the high number of CIIs in Southeast Asia. Firstly, the CIIs are less ideological, focusing on cultural and social aspects in their teaching. As such, they do not present a threat to the local states. Secondly, the nation-building project in Southeast Asia has been largely successful, such that these states do not deem Chinese language learning to be a threat, as in the past. With the lack of resistance from local governments, and with the economic opportunities presented by China, Chinese education has begun to transcend beyond the ethnic Chinese community.

In the West, many suspect CIIs to be spy organisations and channels for CCP propaganda, but such issues have not been raised in SEA to any significant degree. Southeast Asian governments feel able to control the situation and to benefit from the presence of these institutes. In Indonesia, however, major universities such as Universitas Indonesia (UI) and Universitas Gajah Mada (UGM) do not have CIIs, as many staff members are still very critical of China.⁵

EXPANSION OF CHINA'S TERTIARY EDUCATION

In what can be seen as an attempt to spread and expand China's soft power, Beijing has also established overseas university campuses in SEA. The first overseas China's university was established in Vientiane, Laos in October 2012. It is called Lao Soochow University, or Soochow University in Laos.⁶ This university focuses on international economics, finances and trade, and the major medium of instruction is Chinese (Mandarin).⁷ In their mastering Chinese language rather than English or other foreign language, one may assume that they are meant to serve in China or in Laos-China joint companies

Xiamen University in Malaysia, however, follows a different model. Established in 2016, it is an international university; all of the courses, with the exception of Chinese Studies and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), are taught in English. The university offers engineering, economics, sciences and so on. Half of its students are from China, and the other half are from Malaysia and elsewhere. When the university first opened its doors, 180 students were accepted. In 2019, it boasted 120 graduates. Currently, it caters for 4,000 students, and the university expects enrolment to reach 10,000 students in a decade.⁸

The establishment of the university has aided in spreading China's soft power. The dominant party in Malaysia then—United Malays National Organization (UMNO) did not protest against its establishment.⁹ After all, the project was supported by then-Prime Minister, Najib Razak.

While no major Chinese university has established a branch in Thailand, the Open University of Fujian recently began a joint venture with the Thai Wilailak University to set up an Overseas

Chinese College in Bangkok,¹⁰ suggesting that this college will strongly attract not just students from China, but also from Thailand.

The Chinese government and various Chinese universities and foundations often offer scholarships to Southeast Asian students. These are mainly for tertiary students to study at universities all over China. It is also worth noting that they study not only languages and social sciences but also technology, sciences, economics and business administration. According to 2018 data, the largest number of Southeast Asian students in China came from Thailand, followed by those from Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam and Malaysia (see Table 3 below).

Students from remaining five Southeast Asian countries are in low numbers; according to some reports, they range from several hundred (the Philippines) to a couple of thousand (Indonesia). Very few have come from Brunei Darussalam.

Table 3: SEA Students in China and Chinese Students in SEA

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of SEA students in China</i>	<i>Number of Chinese students in SEA</i>
Thailand	28,608	10,000
Indonesia	15,050	A few hundred
Laos	14,645	N.A.
Vietnam	11,299	N.A.
Malaysia	9,479	10,000
Singapore	N.A.	13,000-15,000

Source: 2018 China’s statistics and others; various sources

CONCLUSION

In the past, Chinese schools in Southeast Asia (SEA) were established by the local Chinese communities. The states, both China and the countries of SEA, were not involved in the establishment of these schools. However, after Southeast Asian countries came into being, and local nationalism began to grow, the majority of ethnic Chinese became local nationals/citizens. This also affected local the wellbeing and nature of Chinese schools and education. The Southeast Asian states began to intervene and Chinese school curriculum became localised. After 1949, the division between the Republic of China (ROC) and People’s Republic of China (PRC) educational systems impacted Chinese education in Southeast Asia; but gradually, the PRC language system became the dominant system.

Due to the “nationalisation” of Chinese schools by many Southeast Asian states, the standard of the Chinese language among ethnic Chinese have gradually declined. With the exception of Malaysia and Laos, most “Chinese schools” have been transformed into local schools that offer the Chinese language only as a subject taught for several hours a week. Many of their teachers are not well qualified and there is no conducive environment for ethnic Chinese children to learn the Chinese language. Anti-China and anti-ethnic Chinese attitudes in many countries in the region have also impacted Chinese language learning.

However, with the rise of China and its dramatic economic development, the Chinese language has become valuable again. A strong command of the Chinese language is often required to establish economic ties with the PRC or to find work in China's overseas companies.

China's *Hanban* introduced Confucius Institutes in all Southeast Asian states but one. These not only offer ethnic Chinese but also non-Chinese Southeast Asians the opportunity to study Chinese. The Chinese language has become rather popular among non-Chinese.

Given China-US rivalry, some anti-China elements use ideological arguments to stop the further development of Chinese education. Although China itself has deemphasised the ideological contents in its overseas education, and many countries also see Chinese language and education as purely economic and technological tools, the politicisation of China's educational institutions may present a problem in Southeast Asian states that are based on Western or religious preferences.

ENDNOTES

¹ For a detailed study on Tan Kah Kee, see C.F. Yong, *Tan Kah Kee: The Making of an Overseas Chinese Legend*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989.

² Tan Liok Ee, "Chinese Schools in Malaysia: A Case of Cultural Resilience", in Lee Kam Hing and Tan Chee Beng, eds. *The Chinese in Malaysia*, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp.228-254.

³ Suryadinata, Leo. 2017. *The Rise of China and Chinese Overseas: Beijing's Changing Policy towards Southeast Asia and Beyond*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing. Neo, Peng Fu. 2022. "Confucius Institutes in Southeast Asia: An Overview". In *Rising China and New Chinese Migrants in Southeast Asia*, edited by Leo Suryadinata and Benjamin Loh, pp.49–67. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing

⁴ In Indonesia, for instance, those who study the Chinese language are mainly non-Chinese, as few Chinese Indonesians want to become Chinese language teachers; they prefer to study other courses that are more practical and would generate better income.

⁵ It is interesting to note that in some countries, like Indonesia, Confucianism is considered a religion; thus, in many Indonesian universities, the Confucius Institutes are called "Mandarin Language Centres" (*Pusat Bahasa Mandarin*) instead. The purpose is to not confuse the language with the Confucian Religion. Nevertheless, when it is reported on in the Chinese language, the Chinese name *Kongsi Xueyuan* (孔子学院, "Confucius Institute" in Chinese) is still used.

⁶ [Soochow University in Laos Pioneers Chinese Education Abroad | China-ASEAN – China Report ASEAN](#) (retrieved 25 June 2023)

⁷ The Lao students are required to study one year on the Laos campus, but from second year to fourth year, they have to study at the Soochow University China campus. They have to be proficient in the Chinese language before they could graduate. According to one report, by 2017, 200 Lao students have passed undergraduate or post graduate degrees from Soochow University, and they would get two degrees, one from Soochow University in China and the other from Laos. According to the same information, the "1+3" model (i.e. 1 year in Laos and 3 years in China) would gradually be changed to "2+2" model in the future.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.97.

⁹ Chang, Peter T.C. 2022. "China's Soft Power and the Chinese Overseas: Case Study of Xiamen University and the Confucius Institute in Malaysia". In *Rising China and New Chinese Migrants in Southeast Asia*, edited by Leo Suryadinata and Benjamin Loh, pp. 91–106. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.

¹⁰ See [The ASEAN-Bangkok Learning Center, College of Overseas Chinese, Walailak University Center is officially open! – Maleny Celtic](#)

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